# A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN

## How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires

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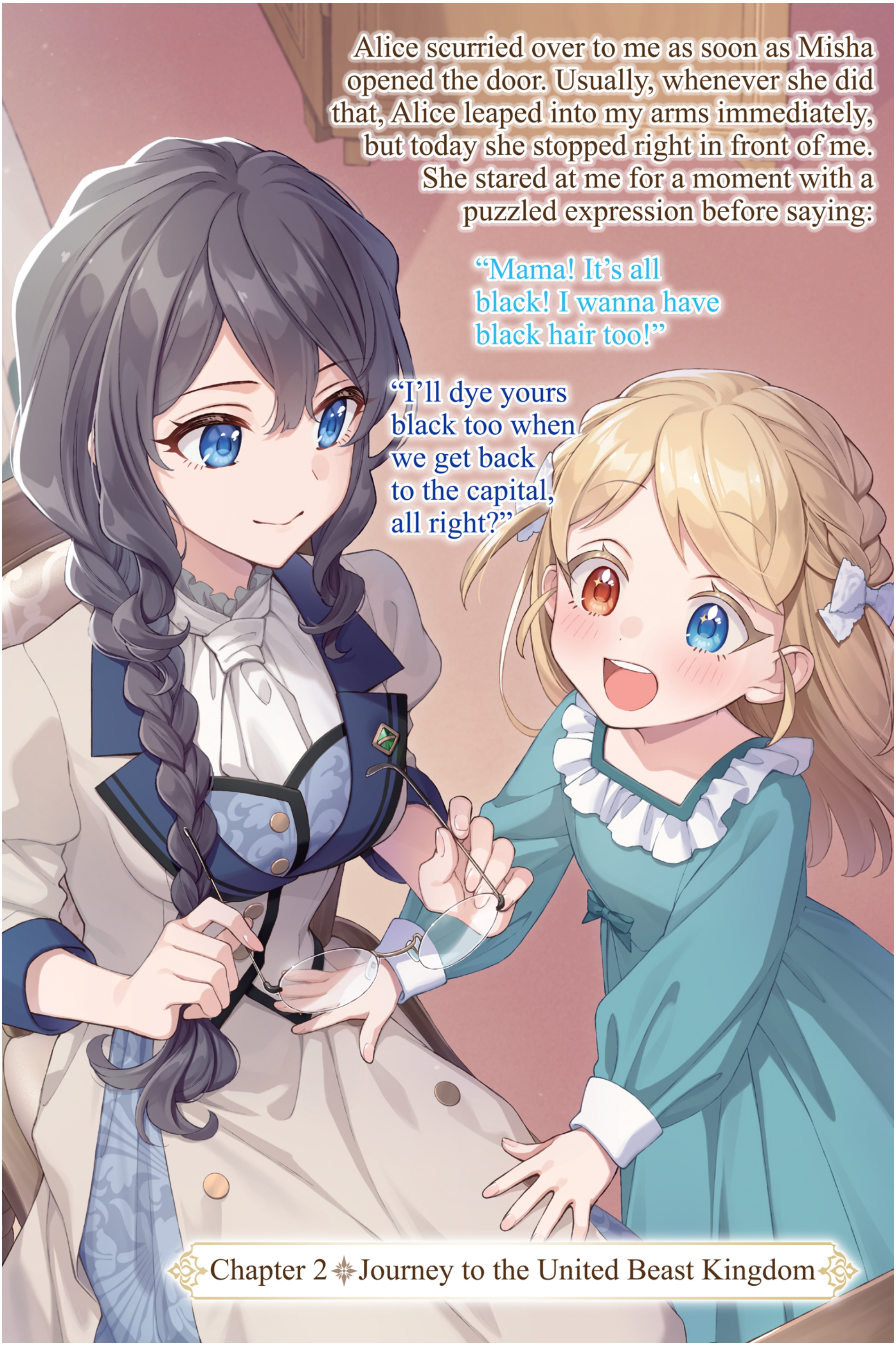
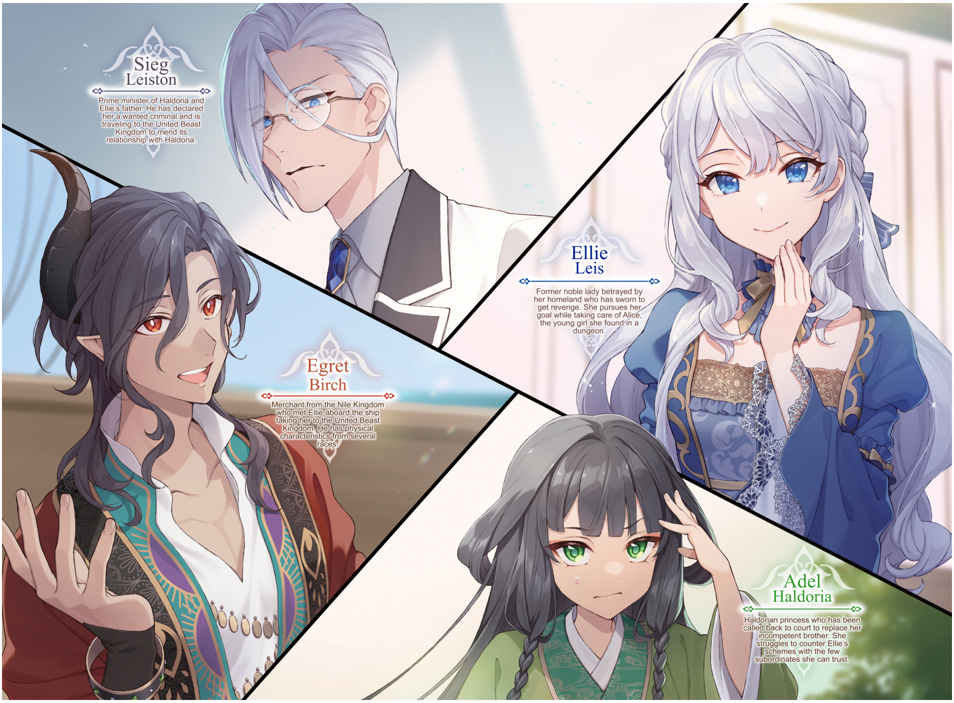

Alice scurried over to me as soon as Misha opened the door. Usually, whenever she did that, Alice leaped into my arms immediately, but today she stopped right in front of me. She stared at me for a moment with a puzzled expression before saying:
"Mama! It's all black! I wanna have black hair too!"
"I'll dye yours black too when we get back to the capital, all right?"
Chapter 2 ✦ Journey to the United Beast Kingdom



**Sieg Leiston**

Prime minister of Haldoria and Ellie's father. He has declared her a wanted criminal and is traveling to the United Beast Kingdom to mend its relationship with Haldoria.

**Ellie Leis**

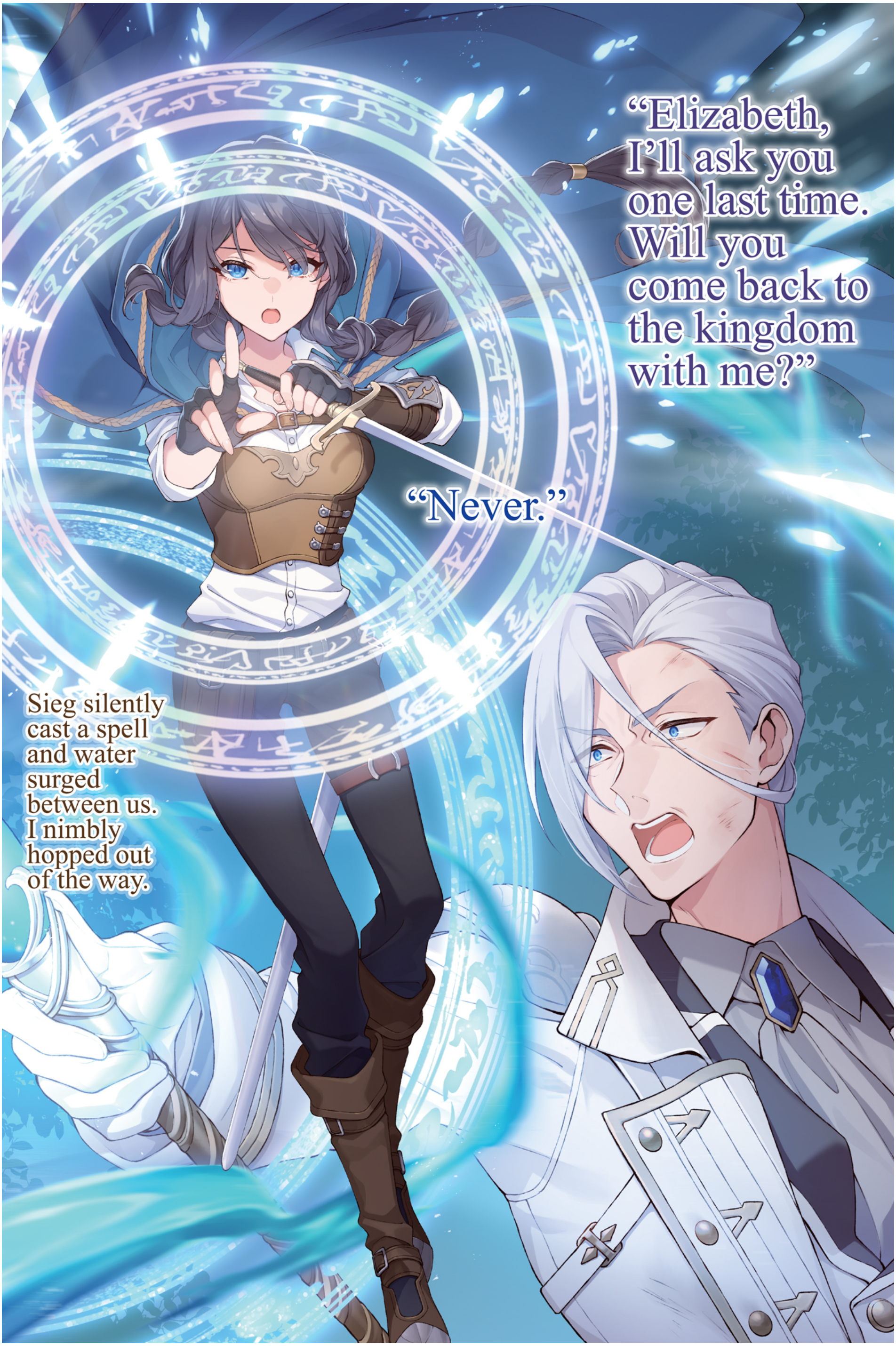
Former noble lady betrayed by her homeland who has sworn to get revenge. She pursues her goal while taking care of Alice, the young girl she found in a dungeon.

**Egret Birch**

Merchant from the Nile Kingdom who met Ellie aboard the ship taking her to the United Beast Kingdom. He has physical characteristics from several races.

**Adel Haldoria**

Haldorian princess who has been called back to court to replace her incompetent brother. She struggles to counter Ellie's schemes with the few subordinates she can trust.


"Elizabeth, I'll ask you one last time. Will you come back to the kingdom with me?"
"Never."
Sieg silently cast a spell and water surged between us. I nimbly hopped out of the way.

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# Prologue

“Miss Ellie, I have the report on our line of products for beastkin.”

I was working in my office in the imperial capital, poring over the latest financial statement from Traitre’s production base in the east of Lebrick Margravate, when Mireille approached with a stack of papers in hand. Her maid dress was as impeccable as always, the fabric devoid of even a single crease. I accepted the documents and untied the string that kept them bound together, then quickly reviewed the pages and signed them.

“There don’t seem to be any issues,” I said. “No need to change anything.”

“All right, miss.” Mireille took the papers from me and started walking away, but I stopped her before she could leave my office.

“Ah, wait. This too, please,” I said, handing her the financial statement I’d been perusing.

“Of course, miss,” she replied, taking the papers. She bowed and left the room. I stretched a little, then turned to the catkin girl who was busy reorganizing the documents lining the shelves behind me.

“Misha, do I have anything scheduled after this?”

“No, that was all for today.”

“All right, thank you. I’ll leave the rest of the work to you, then,” I said.

“Yes, miss.”

I put away my pen and ink before leaving the office.

“Miss Ellie,” a young girl with braids called as I stepped into the corridor.

“What is it, Lunoa?”

“A letter came for you.”

“Thank you.”

I checked the name of the sender. The letter was from Hauel, the employee I had put in charge of Traitre’s branch in Count Hammitt’s territory, which bordered the sea. Next month, I planned to head to one of Haldoria's vassal nations, the United Beast Kingdom, and I intended to travel by ship. I'd asked Hauel to arrange that for me, so I assumed this was his report on the matter. A quick look confirmed my suspicions. After I'd read the letter, I asked Lunoa to bring it to Misha in my office, and I continued on my way to the courtyard.

A little girl crouched in front of a flower bed, peering intently at the flowers as a few maids watched over her. As she heard my footsteps, she turned to look. As soon as she saw me, a bright smile appeared on her face and she ran up to me, her beautiful blonde hair radiating in the sunlight.

"Mama!" she squealed.

"I'm sorry for the wait, Alice," I said.

"Are you done with work?"

"Yes, I just finished."

"Then can you read me a book, mama?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Of course. But let's go back inside. It's getting colder."

"Okay!"

I dismissed Alice's maids with a wave, then picked up the little girl before heading to my room.

# Chapter 1: Our Daily Lives in the Capital

“Alice truly said that?” I asked, surprised.

“She did,” Misha confirmed. “She wants to help you with your work.”

“Oh my.” Apparently, Alice had told Misha she wanted to assist me. Needless to say, there was no real work she could do, but she seemed very eager to help. I remembered reading in a book on child-rearing that supporting such endeavors was important for fostering your young one’s independence.

“I suppose I should come up with something for her to do,” I mused.

“Will you give her some easy tasks?” Misha asked.

“That’s the thing,” I replied, pausing to think. “I’m running a company here. There aren’t exactly that many ‘easy’ tasks to do...”

I didn’t mind allowing Alice to help, but as I racked my brain, I wasn’t able to think of anything she could do. I couldn’t let Alice do the things Lunoa and Misha did for fear that she would disrupt the business.

The next day, Elsa brought me a report, so I took a break to enjoy a cup of tea with her. I told her about my current worries, and she gave me a breakthrough.

“You don’t need to have her help you with anything related to the firm,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Alice wants to help *you* out, not Traitre. Just have her run an errand for you or something like that.”

“You’re right!” That was it! Elsa was absolutely correct! But could I send her out on an errand alone? It hadn’t been long since she’d been kidnapped. I didn’t want her to be scared, and I couldn’t stand the thought of her being in danger.

“First, I must eliminate all danger...” I whispered.

“Huh?” Elsa questioned, confused.

I paid her no mind as I started mentally devising the perfect mission for Alice.

◆

A line of tents bearing the crest of the Church of Ibris stood by the ruins near Kellevan, the city that was home to the most famous entertainment district in the empire. In the largest tent of all, a sister wearing a nun's garment lay on her makeshift desk, surrounded by piles of documents.

"Haven't we done enough already? Who cares about the details?" she whined.

"How could you say such a thing, Cardinal Tildania? Come now, please have a look at the next document."

Tildania, otherwise known as Tida, sighed as Deacon Rivus, the commander of the sixth squad of the Fourth Division of Holy Knights, pushed more documents toward her. It had been a month since the kidnapping incident that had rocked Kellevan.

"Aah... Miss Ellie and the others returned to the capital, yet here I am, stuck here, in a tent *outside* Kellevan. I wanna go home too, forget about all this work, and have a good drink! Urgh... I can't do this anymore!" A stream of complaints poured out of Tida's mouth as she sluggishly turned the pages and scrawled her signature at the bottom.

"I'm really not suited to dealing with such borin—um, I mean *sensitive* work. Can't you just deal with it as you see fit? This is all the fault of that traitor—Dondor, was it? He must be deep, deep in Hell by now. A piece of trash like him has no place by God's side," she continued, her hands still busy with the papers.

Eventually, she shoved the mound of documents back into Rivus's hands.

"There you go. I'm done," she said.

"Thank you, Cardinal Tildania. Now if you could be so kind as to check this—"

Tida cut Rivus off in the middle of his sentence. "No! No more, Deacon Rivus! That was more than enough for today!"

"B-But, Your Eminence—"

"Hello, God! Huh, what's that? You agree!" she exclaimed. "Did you hear that? God spoke to us! The Lord wishes for me to rest!"

"I didn't hear anything..." replied Rivus hesitantly.

"That won't do! You clearly lack devotion! Pray, Deacon Rivus. You must meditate and pray for at least five hours!"

"U-Understood, Your Eminence!" Rivus meekly squeaked, immediately starting to pray.

While he was busy, Tida quietly sneaked out of the tent. She made sure none of the holy knights noticed her escape as she headed to Kellevan. As soon as she arrived, she barged into a tavern.

"W-Welcome," the owner said, surprised by her sudden intrusion.

"Hello. Hmm... I guess I'll start with whatever you recommend."

"Coming right up," the owner answered, swiftly preparing a glass and plate for her. "Here you go. Rice wine and demondeer offal stew."

"Oh!"

The owner served Tida a glass of clear alcohol and a stew made from the organs of deerlike monsters.

"It's not often that one sees such clear alcohol on this continent. It's from the eastern archipelago, isn't it?" Tida inquired. She'd once received alcohol just as clear from the Rank A adventurer Yuuka Kusunoki, hence her guess.

"So young yet so knowledgeable," the owner praised. "You see, I used to be an adventurer. I get my stock from people in the east who I met back in those days. Like you said, there aren't many taverns around here that'll serve you rice wine."

"Wow!" Tida was pleased that she'd found such a rare beverage in a tavern she'd picked at random. She looked down at her glass once more. It was polished to perfection, allowing her to study the transparent liquid. The wine's color—or lack thereof—contrasted with the strong aroma of alcohol that wafted through the air.

Tida picked up the glass and took a small sip. A burning sensation began in her mouth and accompanied the liquid's passage all the way to her stomach. She felt the heat diffuse through her entire body. This was nothing like the wine or ale she was so accustomed to consuming. The taste was hard to describe—refined yet wild. Tida then tried a bite of the demondeer dish.

"What a rich taste!" she exclaimed. Deer offal was a delicacy usually enjoyed by hunters in the heart of the forest. Freshness was of the essence for such a dish, which meant it wasn't often served in restaurants. Even on the rare occasion that a restaurant carried it, it usually tasted mediocre. In this case, however, Tida could hardly smell any foulness from the viscera—proof it had been prepared by an expert while the meat was still fresh.

"Oh! What's this mysterious flavor I'm tasting underneath?" asked Tida.

The owner let out a satisfied laugh. "That would be the taste of miso, missy."

"Miso?"

"Fermented soybeans," he explained. "It's a condiment they use in the eastern archipelago. A few firms have started importing it. Goes well with the rice wine, doesn't it?"

After eating a few spoonfuls of stew and savoring the way that the peculiar taste of miso melded with the unique texture of offal, Tida washed it all down with a big gulp of rice wine.

"It goes amazingly well!" she said. "And chasing the rich taste with strong alcohol feels great!"

The owner laughed again. "You've got great taste, missy! Here, try this!"

"What's in it?" Tida asked as he handed her a small container. She shook it and immediately noticed that it was filled with some sort of powder.

"That's chili pepper powder. They use it a lot on the Southern Continent. Add some to your miso stew. It might sting a bit, but I promise it'll go even better with the alcohol."

"Interesting!" Tida did as she was told and took another bite. The flavorful saltiness of the stew took on a new dimension with the distinct spiciness.

"That's amazing!" Tida exclaimed.

"Glad you like it!"

"I sure found a hidden gem! I never knew there was such a great place around here."

After that, Tida enjoyed sampling a myriad of drinks from the east she'd never had before, downing everything from a sweet rice wine with low alcohol content to a strong and spicy sweet-potato spirit. She also got to try tempura and soy sauce along with her stew.

And so, Tida happily drank the night away, feeling her stress and irritation from overwork melt from her body.

A few days later, after she finished all of the work that the ever-serious Rivus had thrown her way, Tida left for the imperial capital. Marquess Cobatt's territory was not far from the capital, and the roads were well maintained, which made her journey on foot easy.

One day, after several hours of walking at a leisurely pace, Tida came across a village.

"The sun is starting to set. Let's hope I can find a place to spend the night there," she said to herself.

The gatekeeper eyed Tida cautiously as she approached, but he lowered his guard as soon as he noticed her religious habit.

"Welcome, sister."

"Good evening. I'm looking for accommodations for the night. May I enter the village?"

"Sure thing. I'm sure the mayor will receive you. Go to the largest house, in the center of the village."

"Thank you."

"For a sister to come by at such a time... It must be God's will!" the gatekeeper whispered after she'd walked away. Tida hadn't heard him, but she saw him clasp his hands together in prayer.

"Huh?" She tilted her head to the side in confusion. "I guess he must be very pious."

Tida reached the center of the village and immediately spotted the house the gatekeeper had told her about. It was at least twice the size of the other houses. She wasn't surprised, though. In such remote villages, it was common for the mayor's residence to double as an assembly hall and an inn for travelers.

Shortly after, Tida had successfully obtained permission to stay for the night. She ate the simple meal served to her by the mayor's wife.

"Sister, there is something I'd like to ask you..." the mayor said as he and his wife approached Tida after she was done eating.

"I'd be happy to help if it's in my power," she replied.

"Well..." he said haltingly, "it's about our grandson..."

"Your grandson?"

"He was wounded very badly by a monster a few days ago."

"A few days ago... During the stampede?"

"Yes. Some of the monsters that swarmed out of the nearby dungeon reached our village."

When the core of a dungeon was destroyed, it would trigger a stampede. Tida had heard about a recent stampede while traveling.

However, according to what she knew, the lord of the territory had ordered the core to be destroyed intentionally because he didn't want a dungeon near his city. His army, which he had raised to deal with the monsters, had done the deed, erasing the recently established dungeon that had only been two floors deep.

"The monsters were all killed by the adventurers who came chasing after them, but...before they could slay the beasts, our grandson was attacked. My son and his wife lost their lives trying to protect him. All we have left is this boy, and he doesn't have long left now," he said before pausing. "Please, sister, could you pray for him?"

"Of course."

The monsters must have been more numerous than the lord of the territory had anticipated, Tida assumed. Or, perhaps his soldiers and the adventurers he had hired were too weak. Either way, this was tragic. A good lord would take the time to inquire about any damage, dispatch healers, and hand out suitable compensation. It was too early to assume this lord would not do that, though. Unfortunately, relief efforts usually had to wait until after things were completely cleaned up at the source of the stampede.

Tida followed the couple to a room in the back. There, a boy who looked to be about five years old was lying in bed, his breathing heavily labored.

"He *is* badly wounded," Tida said. "But this looks fixable with healing magic."

The mayor let out a gasp. It made sense that he and his wife had given up previously. No one in a remote village could possibly heal such injuries. Tida, however, could.

"In fact, I can heal him myself," she added.

"T-Truly?!"

"Yep. Intermediate Heal."

As soon as Tida cast her spell, the boy's breathing stabilized and he wearily opened his eyes. The couple, on the verge of tears, couldn't stop thanking Tida. She soothed them as best she could before instructing them to feed the boy nourishing food to help him regain his strength.

The mayor ran off, picked up an earthenware pot, and brought it to Tida.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Fruit liqueur," the mayor answered. "We've been making it in this village for generations. We usually drink it for important celebrations. Please, have a glass with me."

"I'd love to!" Tida received a small wooden bowl from the mayor, which he quickly filled with the liqueur.

"Thanks for the drink," Tida said, taking a big gulp. The refreshing aroma of fruit entered her nostrils as the taste of alcohol filled her mouth. There was a tinge of sourness amid the sweetness.

"That hit the spot!" she exclaimed. It was somewhat unrefined compared to other drinks she'd had, but that gave the liqueur a charm of its own.

"Please try this too!" the mayor's wife said, eagerly offering food.

"What is it?"

"Grilled and salted freshwater fish. We eat them a lot here."

The fish she presented to Tida was only the size of a finger, and it had been grilled whole. Tida ate half of it—including the head—in one bite. She noticed the stomach of the fish was filled with eggs, to the point that some almost spilled from its bitten body.

"It's mating season," the mayor's wife explained, seeing Tida's confusion. "Makes them the perfect snack with a drink."

The sensation of the eggs popping in Tida's mouth, the bitterness of the innards, the flavorfulness of the fish's flesh, and the saltiness of the seasoning all melded in perfect harmony. The taste of the animal paired exquisitely with the fruit liqueur, which itself represented the very peak of what the garden had to offer.

Tida had come to this place by chance, but she'd been blessed with the opportunity to save a boy's life and enjoy delicious alcohol and fish as a reward. The thought put her in a very good mood.

Tida sat on the terrace of Grimoire, one of the most popular teahouses in the capital. She was drinking hot chocolate, Grimoire's newest product, in the company of Ellie Leis, the shop's owner.

"And so I dumped the rest of my work on that boring deacon and returned to the capital," Tida concluded. She had finished telling Ellie everything that had happened in Kellevan after her departure.

"Tida... You should think of keeping up appearances sometimes."

"You already know the kind of person I am, so what would be the point in hiding? Besides, I'm an eminent cardinal. Letting my subordinates do the annoying work is *exactly* what I should be doing."

"I disagree. Those who hold positions of power must honor their responsibilities," Ellie said. Then, she let out a deep sigh.

Tida had yet to respond when Grimoire's pâtissier and another employee, who was pushing a small tea cart, approached.

"Miss, I've prepared the chocolates you requested," said the pâtissier.

"Thank you," Ellie replied.

The pâtissier set down a plate of small chocolate treats on the table.

"What are those?" Tida asked. "They don't look all that dissimilar to the rest of the chocolates you can buy here. I've had some with almonds and dried fruits before. Are these ones any different?"

"Do you remember telling me that chocolate would go well with alcohol?" Ellie saw Tida's eyes widen in surprise. "Well, this is the result of the research we conducted afterward," Ellie continued. "We enclosed whiskey, a distilled liquor from the Northern Continent, in a sugar shell and coated it with chocolate."

"Oh!" Tida picked up one of the chocolates and gazed at it intently. "While it looks the same as other chocolate treats, I can definitely smell the liquor up close!"

"Do try one," Ellie said. "I'd like to hear your thoughts on it."

"Here I go!" Tida popped the chocolate into her mouth. At first, she sensed only a hint of liquor among the alternating sweet and bitter tastes of the chocolate. Then she bit into the center, shattering the thin sugar shell and letting the liquor escape. It coalesced with the chocolate melting on her tongue.

"Incredible! Miss Ellie, this is unbelievable! Each flavor stands out against the others before they all merge together! This is the delicacy every drinker dreams of!"

"I see. That's good to hear. I'm sure the nobles will like it, in that case."

"They will! I couldn't even imagine a better snack myself!" Tida exclaimed.

Tida sampled every morsel on the plate, all the while singing the chocolate's praises.

"The type of whiskey used for each of these is different, isn't it? They all have a distinct flavor! Miss Ellie, you must tell me, what is the name of these treats?"

"The name?" Ellie repeated. "We haven't decided yet."

"Is that so?"

"We only just finalized the recipe."

"Heh heh. In that case, I, the great Cardinal Tildania, shall bless them with a name."

"You? Well, I suppose that's fine..."

"Seriously?! You don't mind me naming them? I was just joking."

"In a way, we could say you invented them," Ellie replied. "And you are a cardinal of the Church of Ibris, so I imagine there is a chance we *might* be blessed with divine grace if you were to name them... Perhaps."

"You seem rather unsure."

"No way, that's just your imagination. Anyway, what did you want to name them?"

"Let me see... My, that's a big responsibility. The bestowing of names is an important religious rite."

According to the doctrine of the Church of Ibris, every being born into the world had to be given a name in order to receive God's benediction and thereby be acknowledged as an individual. As a clergywoman, Tida had been asked to bestow names upon newborns on many occasions. She'd also learned the importance of this ritual during her studies at the monastery.

"This time I'm naming a product, not a child, so I've got to take that into account... A catchy name that people can easily remember would be best, right? Whiskey and chocolate... And a sugar shell..." Tida paused again before continuing. "Speaking of sugar shells, I feel like I've heard of another sweet like that."

"You must be thinking of bonbons. They're rather popular on the Northern Continent," said the pâtissier, who until now had been watching Tida and Ellie in silence.

"Bonbons... Chocolate bonbons... Whiskey bonbons... Hang on..." Tida mused. "All right! I think I've got it! Catchy, easy to remember, and has a nice sound to it—the perfect name!"

"Have you made up your mind?" Ellie asked.

"Yep! These chocolate treats shall henceforth be known as whis—" Tida was proudly announcing the name when a gust of wind blew a leaf right onto her nose. "Choo!"

"Very well. We shall call them 'whischoos,' as you wish," Ellie declared.

"Huh?"

"I'm leaving the rest to you," Ellie told the pâtissier. She swiftly wrote the name on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Huh?" Tida repeated, utterly baffled.

"Yes, miss," the pâtissier answered. He bowed before disappearing back inside the shop.

"What in the world?" Tida whispered, staring at Ellie, who was sipping on her hot chocolate, unbothered.

"Now that the matter is settled, I have a request for you," Ellie said.

"But I just arrived in the capital!"

"I'll give you three boxes of whischoos in exchange."

"What do you need?"

◆

Since returning to the capital, Misha had gone out to jog every morning. Today, she'd run for around an hour before returning to Ellie's mansion in the capital's high-class residential area. She was out of breath, and her tail trembled with every inhale. After taking some time to catch her breath, Misha returned to her room and wiped off her sweat with a wet towel before changing into her work uniform. Then, she joined Mireille to begin the day's work.

"You're five minutes late, Misha," warned Mireille.

"I-I'm terribly sorry." She'd taken too long to get ready and had ended up late. Feeling sorry that she had made Mireille wait for her, Misha bowed in apology.

"You were training in the morning again, weren't you?"

"I-I was..."

Mireille sighed. "Your wounds were so bad that it's a miracle you didn't die. How many times must I tell you it's too early to resume strenuous exercise?"

"I'm sorry, but I..." Misha said weakly, averting her eyes.

Mireille patted her head. “I understand how you feel. I have been through something similar.”

“Miss Mireille...”

Mireille sat on the sofa and gestured for Misha to sit down opposite her. Misha bowed once more before complying. Mireille then started brewing tea with the practice tea set she’d prepared.

“You must know by now that Miss Ellie is a former noblewoman from the Kingdom of Haldoria.”

“Yes.”

“Her talent was discovered at a young age, and before she even reached the age to properly make her debut in high society, she started being involved in politics and trade. I, too, am a former noble. After the downfall of my house, I found myself with nothing. I thought my only choices were to become a beggar or sell myself into slavery until Miss Ellie took me in.”

Mireille’s story reminded Misha of her own, though Misha had, in fact, become a slave.

“I was lucky that Master Cedric was kind,” Misha said. “But realistically speaking, my odds of being purchased by a horrible master were high. Miss Ellie saved me. While I am a slave, I am not treated any differently from the other employees. Miss Ellie allows me plenty of rest and even gives me money that I’m free to spend as I wish.”

*That’s exactly why I must be of use to her*, Misha stopped herself from adding. But Mireille knew what Misha was thinking even without her saying it.

“Afterward,” Mireille continued, “I started working at Miss Ellie’s residence. I was taught how to behave as a proper attendant without casting shame on my master. It was back then that I decided I’d do everything in my power to serve Miss Ellie faithfully, to the best of my ability. One day, the two of us were walking through the streets of the royal capital of Haldoria on business, and we were attacked by a group of men.”

“What?!”

“I tried to protect Miss Ellie, but the men promptly captured me. They used me as a hostage to prevent her from fighting back, and the men kidnapped her.” Mireille took a sip of tea, ignoring Misha’s astonished look, before continuing. “Then, the men let me go. They shoved a ransom demand into my hands and ordered me to bring it to her family. I felt terribly guilty for having put her in that situation. Without me holding her back, she would have escaped. I started thinking that I would be better off dead than a burden to her. I made my way to her home, despising myself every step of the way. And when I arrived...I found Miss Ellie waiting there.”

“Huh? Did someone save her?”

“No. After the kidnappers took her to their hideout, she defeated them all and left.”

“That’s...quite something.”

“Miss Ellie saw me crying and said, ‘Dry up those tears and go pour me a cup of coffee. You did what you could, and that is enough. Leave what you cannot do to others, and focus on what *you* can do. Brewing me the perfect coffee, for instance. Only you ever get it right.’”

Misha remained silent.

“You may not know what it is yet, but one day you also will find the one thing only you can do,” Mireille said with a smile, setting her cup down on the table. “Now, shall we practice brewing black tea?”

“Y-Yes!” Misha gulped down the rest of her tea and stood up. She couldn’t help but think that while Mireille didn’t often show her feelings on her face, she truly was compassionate.

Despite her kindness, Mireille hadn’t forgotten about Misha’s tardiness, and she made sure to be especially strict that day.

After her lessons with Mireille on tea and etiquette, Misha moved on to her work for the firm. It was slightly past noon when she finished checking the inventory in the warehouse. She dropped by Ellie’s office to deliver her report, and her mistress gave her a task.

“I’m sorry to bother you with this, Misha, but could you deliver this letter to the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Of course.”

“Once you’re done, you may take the rest of the day off,” Ellie said.

“All right, miss.”

Sarasa, the catkin receptionist, read the letter from Ellie, then handed Misha a signed paper attesting that the guild had accepted the request.

"All done," she said. "We'll contact you again when an adventurer takes on the mission."

"Thank you very much," Misha replied, stowing the document in the small bag she carried on her shoulder. She bowed to Sarasa before turning back. Since Ellie had granted Misha half of the day off, she didn't have any more work planned. The sun was still high in the sky when she exited the Adventurers' Guild.

Even though Misha was a slave, Ellie gave her pocket money. On her days off, she often wandered about the city, trying out dishes from the many stalls around the market. Today, however, she wasn't in the mood for snacking. She walked away from the center of the city, where most of the guilds' buildings and government offices were located, and found an empty lot on the outskirts. There, she unsheathed her dagger and started practicing.

"I must...grow stronger..." she panted.

Ellie had repeatedly told Misha that she was to be an attendant, not a bodyguard, and had no reason to beat herself up over the kidnapping. Mireille had also assured Misha she'd eventually find a talent unique to herself. Nevertheless, Misha couldn't let go of the past. On that day, she'd been the only fighter present. If she'd won... If she'd at least had the strength to buy enough time for Lunoa and Alice to run... Misha kept swinging her dagger as thoughts of regret filled her mind.

She swung her blade downward and upward, then spun and pretended to slash at an invisible enemy before finally thrusting into its heart. This sequence was the most basic of dagger training routines, one her father had made her repeat time and time again back when he was still alive. Misha single-mindedly practiced with her dagger until the sun crept back below the horizon, and she found herself standing in the dark.

She was about to head home when a rough-looking man called out to her, "What are you doing in such a place, little catkin?"

He carried a bottle of alcohol in one hand, and a rusty sword hung from his waist. He very much looked like the sort of man whom a young girl out alone wouldn't want to encounter after sundown. Misha wasn't scared at all, though. After all, this man was one of her mistress's subordinates.

"Good evening, Mr. Barl," said Misha.

Barl, befitting his ruffianlike appearance, had until recently been lurking in the underworld of the capital of Haldoria at Ellie's direction. After the recent affair concerning the counterfeit money distributed by order of the crown prince of Haldoria, Barl had come to the imperial capital. At the moment, he worked as an executive for Traitre and was in charge of the guards.

"Hey," he greeted her. "It's a bit too late for a kid to be out alone, don't you think?"

"I-I'm sorry. I was so engrossed in my training that I didn't notice the time..."

Barl hummed. "D'ya still have some time?"

"Huh? Y-Yes, I do. I'm off from work."

"I see. Come on, then, let's go grab dinner."

Misha followed Barl to an eatery in one of the oldest parts of the city. During the daytime, most restaurants around served cheap meals to cater to local workers. At night, however, these establishments mostly provided alcohol and snacks.

Barl ordered and a worker brought several small dishes to the narrow counter.

"I got a few things at random, so eat whatever you'd like."

"Thank you!"

Barl's manners fit his appearance quite well, and he ate heartily. Misha imitated him, and soon the counter was bare while their bellies were stuffed.

Barl had ordered fruit-infused water for Misha, while he knocked back some strong alcohol. He downed his glass, then asked

"So, what's troubling you, little catkin?" he asked after downing his glass.

"Well, the thing is..." Misha told him about the kidnapping. She spoke of how much she regretted her inability to protect Alice and Lunoa as well as how she wanted to become stronger. She also told him what Mireille had said to her earlier in the day.

"I see. So you wanna become strong enough to protect Alice and Lunoa next time they're in danger, is that it?"

"Yes... But I don't know how to achieve that... How to become strong..."

"Hmm," Barl said, then paused. "D'ya know what being 'strong' means, little catkin?"

"Huh?"

"You want to be strong, sure. But what do you actually mean by that?"

"Well, I..."

"No one is ever strong enough to protect their comrades in every situation. No matter how strong you become, there's always gonna be someone stronger." Barl took a big gulp of his liquor before continuing. "See how adventurer parties are? They're a force to be reckoned with because each member does their job, don't you think?"

"I-I do."

"Every member has a role to play. You've got the scout, the damage dealer, the shield, the supporter, and the healer. If one is missing, the party won't work as well anymore. What Mireille was trying to tell you is that you've gotta find the role that fits you."

"My...role?"

"You're still young. Everyone doubts themselves when they come to a big hurdle. But the only way to become stronger is by getting over those hurdles," Barl declared. "All right, that's all the advice I've got for you, little catkin. You've gotta reach your conclusion by yourself. There's value in that."

"Thank you," she said, taking a moment to reflect.

Misha understood Barl's point, but she had trouble coming to terms with it. It was the same as with Mireille's advice. The gist of it was that chasing after strength mindlessly was a pointless pursuit. But then, what was she supposed to do? What was the thing only she could do? What was her role? Misha had no clue.

A few days went by after Misha received advice from Mireille and Barl, yet she was still just as clueless. She spent the morning checking the warehouse's inventory, then went out. She walked by herself along one of the streets of the capital. After the scare of the recent kidnapping, Ellie had forbidden Misha from straying too far. There were regular patrols in this part of town, though, so she was allowed to come here. Misha had initially wanted to train during her free time, but Ellie had strictly forbidden it. And so, after getting lunch at a stall, Misha aimlessly meandered around the city.

"Thank you! Please visit us again!"

"Oh, I'll be back soon!"

Misha's ears pricked up at the familiar voice. She turned to look in that direction and saw a sister leaving a bar.

"Oh, fancy running into you, Misha!" the sister exclaimed.

"Hello, Miss Tida."

Misha knew the woman. She was Tida, a sister of the Church of

Ibris and a good friend of her mistress, Ellie.

"What are you doing here all alone, Misha?"

"Nothing much, really..."

"I see you've got something on your mind. Wanna tell me about it? I'm a sister of Ibris, you know? My job is to guide lost lambs," Tida said, thumping her chest proudly.

Misha didn't know much about Tida, but she'd heard from Ellie that the sister held a very important position within the Church of Ibris. *It couldn't hurt to get her advice, could it?* she figured, following Tida to a nearby park.

The two sat down and Tida asked, "So! What has you so down? Let God know of your troubles, my child."

Misha had told the story to others several times by now, so she relayed it once again to Tida. She also told her about the advice she had received from Mireille and Barl.

Tida patted Misha's head lightly and said, "The worries of the youth, I see. That Barl guy was right, though. You have to find the answer for yourself."

"Miss Tida, if you'd been in my shoes, what would you have done?"

"If my friends were about to be kidnapped? Hmm... I'd focus on killing the criminals, even if my friends got hurt in the process."

"What?!"

"As long as they don't die on the spot, people can be healed with magic. And in such a big city, there's bound to be a decent healer or two. If I didn't think I could kill the kidnappers, I guess my second choice would be to run away."

"Huh?!"

"We're dealing with kidnappers, not murderers. They wouldn't go through the trouble of capturing someone just to kill them immediately after. In that case, running away to gather allies is much smarter than fighting a losing battle."

Tida's reasoning made complete sense. It was based on hard facts and logic, and it considered her battle abilities, the strength of the assailants, and the situation as a whole.

"Did I make the wrong choice?" Misha eventually asked after a pause.

"The path you chose wasn't necessarily wrong. But you lacked the strength to walk it."

"Then I truly must get stronger... Only then will I..." Misha whispered, looking down.

A fond smile spread across Tida’s lips, and she gently rested her hand on Misha’s head.

“Working to become stronger isn’t a bad thing. But you must remember that the enemies you encounter won’t wait for you to train. All that any of us can do at any given point is strive to do our best with our current abilities.”

Misha was taken aback by Tida’s sudden change in tone and aura. She looked up in a hurry but Tida’s expression had already reverted back into her trademark teasing smile.

“What I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t rush,” Tida continued. “You’re still growing and learning. Failing is a normal part of the process.”

“Is it really?”

“Of course it is. There isn’t a single person in the world who can do everything by themselves. You seem to have a strong sense of responsibility. That’s fine, but you need to learn how to rely on others too.”

*Rely on others.* Misha had always thought that doing so was presuming upon people’s generosity. She already lived far too good of a life considering her status as a slave. She couldn’t ask for more. Yet everyone seemed to be telling her it was okay.

Perhaps she truly had to rely on others, so that one day, others might rely on her too. She needed to improve her strengths while letting others cover for her weaknesses. The answer, which had remained shrouded by a veil of darkness, finally started appearing to her as though light had been cast upon it. Finally, she felt that she could truly come to terms with what Mireille and Barl had said.

“Thank you very much, Miss Tida. I feel a bit lighter now.”

“You do? Of course you do!” Tida exclaimed. “Come to me anytime with your worries, okay?”

Tida waved goodbye and walked away in a cheerful mood. Misha watched her leave, then bowed deeply before returning to the residence. Her steps felt much lighter than they had been these past few days.

◆

“You want to become an adventurer?” Ellie repeated, astonished. It wasn’t often that something surprised her so much that her eyes visibly widened. “You’re giving up on your dream of becoming a great merchant?”

“No,” Lunoa replied, “but I want to gain experience.”

Ever since the kidnapping, Lunoa had spent a lot of time lost in thought. She knew Misha hadn’t stopped beating herself up over the nasty turn of events, but it wasn’t only her fault. If Lunoa had been calmer, she could have worked with Misha to keep the assailants at bay. Perhaps the result would have been different. In that moment, though, Lunoa had been shaken to the core, unable to fight at all.

“I believe what I lacked in that moment was experience. I’ve fought monsters and bandits under your guidance, but that doesn’t really count. I simply followed your directions in fights you’d prepared for me. I didn’t think for myself. I want to learn how to do that by becoming an adventurer for a while.”

Ellie seemed swayed by Lunoa’s explanation, and she nodded.

“I understand your point,” Ellie said. “I agree this could be good for you, but... Hmm...” Ellie rested her chin on her hands and paused, deep in thought. “All right, I’ll allow it. But you must promise me two things: You will report every last detail to me, and you must never accept requests too far from the capital.”

“Okay!”

Having received Ellie’s blessing, Lunoa headed to the Adventurers’ Guild on her next day off. She’d visited on Ellie’s behalf several times, but this time, she was here to register as an adventurer. She’d brought her battle gear with her, including a staff with an embedded wind magic stone, gifted to her by Ellie, and a witch hat that sped up mana regeneration, which Mireille had given her the previous day. She also sported a robe made of monster leather that she’d bought with the help of Lisa, the healer of Sharp Edge, whom she’d run into at the equipment store by chance. Lunoa was a bit nervous as she approached the receptionist, Sarasa.

“Hello, Lunoa. Are you here on behalf of your chairwoman?”

“No. I came to register as an adventurer.”

“Huh?!” exclaimed Sarasa, bewildered. After Lunoa quickly explained her motive, Sarasa understood. “I see,” she continued. “Well, if your boss allows it, I won’t stand in your way. But be careful, all right?”

After Lunoa filled out the necessary forms, Sarasa handed her a guild card. Lunoa was now officially a Rank F Adventurer.

“Do you want to accept a request right away?” Sarasa asked.

“Yes. I planned to take on a request to gather medicinal herbs nearby and complete it within the day.”

“All right. Herb gathering is a permanent request, so you don’t need to fill out any paperwork to accept it. Just bring any herbs you find back to the guild.”

“Got it!” Lunoa thanked Sarasa and left the guild.

At the edge of a forest close to the imperial capital, Lunoa gathered medicinal herbs. She had experience studying a wide variety of herbs, thanks to her unique spell, Item Analysis, which allowed her to easily pick out the ones the Adventurers’ Guild needed. As she foraged, she also picked rare mushrooms and herbs with interesting effects. While they weren’t listed among the items for the quest, she knew the guild would want to buy them.

“Enough for today,” Lunoa said once she had gathered as many high-grade herbs as she could. She wanted to return to the capital before sunset. As she stood up and prepared to depart, she heard a scream echo from the depths of the forest. She could also make out several sets of approaching footsteps.

“What was that?!” Lunoa grabbed her staff, her senses on full alert, and she quickly gathered her belongings. Suddenly, a party of adventurers, who seemed to be roughly Lunoa’s age, sprinted from the middle of the forest. The party consisted of two young men, one holding a sword and shield, and one with a spear, plus a young woman with a bow in hand. They were being chased by a pack of goblins.

Lunoa hesitated for a second at the sight of the pursuit, but she quickly snapped out of it and began chanting. She rushed toward the scene and shouted, “Air Slash!”

The wind magic stone at the tip of Lunoa’s staff amplified her spell. The magic burst forth, hitting the goblins’ vanguard and cleaving the first row in twain. Even some of the goblins standing behind were wounded.

“Huh?! What happened?!” sputtered one of the adventurers.

“Keep running! This way!” Lunoa screamed. The adventurers’ eyes darted her way and they hurried over.

“O winds that blow across the wilderness, merge into a myriad of blades and strike: Consecutive Air Slashes!” A magic circle manifested in the air in front of Lunoa, and a tempest filled with blades of wind flew out, shredding the pursuing goblins.

“Sorry about that! And thank you!” said one of the adventurers.

“Don’t be too quick to thank me; we’re not done! Get in position, fast!” Lunoa shouted. The trio of adventurers hurriedly readied their weapons. There were still six goblins left—four holding clubs, one with a bow and arrows, and another with a staff.

“Strong Winds,” Lunoa commanded. Without the incantation, this spell could only produce mildly powerful gusts. It couldn’t stop the monsters in their tracks, but it was more than enough to slow them down and send the arrow the goblin archer had shot astray.

The young man armed with the sword and shield roared a battle cry before rushing at a goblin. He deftly blocked its club attack with his shield before slashing diagonally at the monster, sending its lifeless body to the ground. Another goblin immediately rushed in to attack him, but the young man wasn’t foolish enough to stay put. He retreated swiftly as his companion stepped in, brandishing his spear. He thrust the spear’s point into the goblin’s throat, then kicked the creature in the stomach to dislodge it. Two goblins tried to take advantage of this momentarily vulnerable position, but the young woman fired off two arrows. The first found its mark between one goblin’s eyes, slaying it instantly. The second arrow missed the heart of the other monster, sinking into the flesh of its arm instead. The impact threw the goblin to the ground. It got up almost immediately, only to be greeted by the butt of the spear, which smashed into its skull.

“Gugyah!” the goblin with a staff screamed, conjuring a fireball that sped toward the adventurers with great force. The trio were taken aback by the goblin’s magic and froze, unable to defend. In contrast, Lunoa remained composed and activated the spell she’d prepared while the others fought.

“Air Wall!” Lunoa exclaimed. The raging fire slammed into the wall of wind and was snuffed out. “Ready an arrow!” she yelled to the young woman.

“Got it!” the archer replied, nocking an arrow and drawing her bow.

Lunoa started chanting, “May the benediction of the wind accompany the arrow that—”

“GIGYAH!” a goblin interrupted, shooting an arrow at Lunoa.

“Like hell you’ll hurt her!” the swordsman shouted, jumping in front of Lunoa and parrying the arrow with his shield. The spearman, who'd been circling around the goblin archer, finally found an opening and slew it. Thanks to the two of them, Lunoa was able to finish casting her spell.

"Air Enchantment!" Enhanced by Lunoa's magic, the girl's arrow cut through the air with lightning speed and skewered the last remaining goblin's skull. At last, the forest was quiet, free from the goblins' unending screams. The adventurer trio panted.

"Did we... Did we win?" the swordsman asked.

"Yeah... There don't seem to be any more goblins coming," said the spear bearer.

"So we're finally safe?" asked the archer. Relieved, they all approached Lunoa.

"Thank you so much for helping us. I'm Les," the swordsman said. "That guy with a spear is Rio, and our archer's name is Ea."

"You rescued us. Thank you," Rio said.

"Yes! Thank you so, so, so much! You're our savior!" Ea exclaimed.

"I'm Lunoa. I couldn't have defeated them all on my own, so I'm glad you fought with me."

Lunoa and the others cut off the right ears of the goblins they'd killed as proof to bring back to the guild. Then, they dug a shallow hole, dumped the bodies in it, and burned them before returning to the capital. After passing through the gate, the group was finally able to relax their pace.

"You're the only reason we escaped death, Lunoa. So once again, thank you," said Les.

"Your magic was incredible!" added Rio.

Ea then chimed in. "Right! And you were so calm and composed even though you're still a Rank F adventurer like us!"

"That's only because I received training," Lunoa replied.

The four of them continued to chat as they walked together toward the Adventurers' Guild. Lunoa learned that Les and Ea came from the same village. They'd come to the capital in search of teammates for an adventurer party. Rio, who was in the same situation, had joined them. After training together at the guild, they'd decided to accept an easy mission—gathering berries. It was then that they'd been attacked by goblins.

After arriving at the guild, the group received rewards for the requests they'd completed, along with payment for the goblins they'd killed. The adventurer trio tried to get Lunoa to accept the goblin-slaying sum, but she insisted on dividing it four ways. They'd all fought, so they all deserved a share of the reward. Besides, Lunoa had heard that splitting rewards equally was the best way to avoid trouble.

With the matter of payment settled, Les approached Lunoa, wearing a serious expression.

"Lunoa, would you like to join our party?"

"Me? Join your party?" Lunoa repeated, surprised.

"Yes! With you there, we'd be a lot stronger!" he exclaimed.

"I agree," Rio said. "You're someone we can count on."

"Me too!" Ea chirped. "So, what do you say, Lunoa?"

Once the shock of the offer wore off, Lunoa quickly, but politely, refused.

"I'm sorry. I work at a firm most of the time, so I can't join a party."

"That's a shame," Les replied.

"But we won't insist if you can't," Rio added.

"Yep," Ea agreed. "It's too bad, but there's no point forcing you. Let's take some requests together when you're free, though!"

"Sure, I'd like that," Lunoa said.

After that talk, Lunoa and the others headed to the tavern right next to the guild. Les, Rio, and Ea earnestly wanted to treat Lunoa to a meal to thank her. This time, she didn't refuse their generosity. They all ordered the day's special—grilled orc meat with herbs and boiled vegetables—and ate while daydreaming about their future adventures.

"And then one of the veterans told us about the waves during the recent stampede. Apparently they happened unusually close to one another," said Les.

"The 'waves'?" Lunoa repeated, puzzled.

"Yeah, when a stampede occurs, monsters don't come pouring out of the dungeon continuously," he explained.

"They come out in successive waves!" said Ea.

"And the duration of each wave depends on the size of each floor. The bigger the floor, the longer the wave," Rio finished.

"Or so we heard from the veteran," Les said. "We've never actually been anywhere near a dungeon."

"I see," Lunoa said. "Is that person an adventurer from the capital?"

"Yeah! He taught us so much! Actually, we would have died even before we met you if we hadn't taken his advice to buy potions before heading out. Speaking of which, we're going to need to stock up on potions."

Ea spoke up again. "Effective potions really are a must, huh?"

"But they're pricey," said Rio.

"And we ended up using our most precious potions when we ran into that pack of goblins... Replacing them is gonna use up most of the money we earned..." Les added to the group's complaints.

"Potions, huh?" Lunoa mused. "Oh! Come to think of it, I know a great potion shop!"

"For real?!"

Lunoa led Les and the others out of the tavern and onto the main street. Then, she turned a corner. The others followed her, talking among themselves.

"I've never been to this part of town," said Les.

"Me neither," replied Ea. "From what I've heard, it's mostly obscure stores and expensive shops targeted at veteran adventurers."

"Newbies like us have no business being here," said Les. "Are you really sure there's a potion shop this way, Lunoa?"

Lunoa laughed. "Come on, trust me."

Lunoa had only recently learned about this place from Ellie. As she expected, most people weren't in the know yet. After a bit more walking, Lunoa stopped in front of a building—an old store that had recently been remodeled. At first glance, it appeared to be an unassuming apothecary shop. It was two stories tall, with the ground floor hosting a store and the upstairs divided between a warehouse and the owner's living space.

"W-Wait... Is that...?" Les asked incredulously.

"I've heard about it!" exclaimed Ea.

"Me too," said Rio.

The adventurer trio stared at the signboard in disbelief. Under the word "Open" was a drawing of a bird resting its wings on a perch. And under that was the shop's name: "Ptarmigan's Perch."

"Lunoa!" Les exclaimed. "Is that really Ptarmigan's Perch?!"

"It is," Lunoa replied.

"The shop of the most famous doctor in the empire!" Ea added. "Ptarmigan's Perch sells the best potions around. Even veteran adventurers keep them for emergency situations only!"

“We could never buy anything here!” Rio said.

“It’ll be fine, trust me,” Lunoa said with a smile. The trio was just as surprised as she’d expected. They hesitated to enter such a high-class shop, but Lunoa pushed on their backs one by one to get them to go in.

“Welcome,” said the shopkeeper.

“Hello,” replied Lunoa.

The heavy aroma of medicinal herbs wafted through the shop. Across from the door was a counter, and on the left were shelves filled with medicines, from pills and ointments to herbs. On the right were a small table and a few chairs for guests, as well as another set of shelves lined with implements the trio had never seen before.

“Ah, it’s you, Lunoa. Hello.”

“I’m sorry for visiting so suddenly, Lily. Are you busy?”

The girl at the counter, Lily, was roughly the same age as Lunoa. She was the disciple of the owner of this shop, who was also the best doctor in the empire: Yuuka Kusunoki, the Dark. Lunoa had run errands here quite a few times for Ellie, and she and Lily had become friends. As Lunoa and her new companions had entered the shop, Lily had been peeling the skin off of a dried berry, but she stopped and put it away.

“I’m not busy at all, don’t worry! I didn’t have anything to do, so I was just prepping the tona berries. Anyway, who are these three? New friends?”

“They are! Remember how I told you I wanted to become an adventurer? Well, I registered at the guild this morning. I met them while I was out gathering medicinal herbs in the forest. We fought together.”

“You fought? No one’s hurt, I hope.”

“No, we’re fine. But it seems they ended up using all of their potions. That’s when I remembered what you told me.”

“Oh, *that.* Wait a minute,” Lily said. She disappeared through the door at the back.

“H-Hey, Lunoa,” Les said, worried. “We really don’t have enough to buy anything at a place like this.” Ea and Rio were staring at the prices of the potions behind the counter, gobsmacked. The ones lined up there were the cheapest in the shop, yet a single one cost more than what the average Rank F adventurer earned in six months.

"Sorry for the wait," Lily said, returning with a wooden box. She set it down on the counter and opened the lid. Inside were low-grade healing potions, detoxification potions, and mana recovery potions. There were also drugs to nurse burns, cure fevers, and alleviate pain.

"These are one silver coin each," Lily said.

"Seriously?!" Les exclaimed.

"It's a little expensive for low-grade potions, but if her master Miss Yuu had made them, you'd be looking at eight coins per low-grade potion at least," Lunoa explained. "Hers work better than your average intermediate-grade potions, after all."

"That's exactly why my master doesn't usually make low-grade potions. She says it'll disrupt the market. I made all of these. My master told me that I'm ready to start selling my work—only the ones she approves of, though."

"They won't be as potent as Miss Yuu's potions," Lunoa said, "but I can guarantee that Lily's low-grade potions are much better than those you can find in other shops."

Lily's potions did not have extraordinary effects like Yuu's, but they were still remarkably well-made. After hearing Lunoa's explanation, the adventurer trio decided to buy one potion each. For beginners like them, a silver coin was a big expenditure, but having a quality potion on hand could potentially make the difference between life and death.

Lunoa used Item Analysis to pick out three of the best potions for them.

Lily let out a strained laugh. "That Item Analysis spell of yours is handy as always," she said. She rummaged through the box and took out three small jars of ointment. They were regular drugs with no magical properties. "Here, this is on the house for my first three customers."

"Thank you!" Ea chirped.

"We're much obliged," said Rio.

"We'll be back after earning a lot more money," Les vowed.

The group of four bid Lily goodbye and left the shop before walking back to the main street together. It was now time to part ways; Lunoa would return to Ellie's residence, while the trio would head back to their cheap hotel.

"See you, Lunoa. You were a huge help today," said Les.

"You even introduced a great shop to us. Thank you," Rio added.

“Let’s go on more adventures together when you’re free!” Ea said cheerfully. “Promise you’ll come, okay?”

“I promise,” Lunoa said.

Thus ended Lunoa’s very first adventure. As she’d promised, she’d soon find herself going on more adventures with her new friends during her days off—but that’s a story for another day.

◇

“Miss Ellie, here is the list you requested.”

“You’re done? Thank you, Mireille.”

I started reading through the document. It was a list of people, which I’d asked Mireille to compile for me based on trustworthiness rather than physical strength. It included Barl and a good number of my other subordinates, along with Tida, Elsa and her teammates, and Lunoa’s new friends.

“Miss Ellie... I understand where you’re coming from, but don’t you think this may be a little...*excessive*?”

“What are you talking about, Mireille? It hasn’t been long since Alice was involved in a dangerous incident. I will not risk it happening again.”

“I understand that, of course, but...we’re in the middle of the imperial capital,” Mireille said, her face unable to hide her exasperation.

I didn’t care. I would not leave anything to chance. To be honest, I agreed with Mireille that the idea of kidnappers operating in the middle of the imperial capital was far-fetched, but Alice was too cute to take the risk. What if some deviant noble laid his eyes on her?

I went back to scribbling on the map of the city that was spread across my desk.

◆

Mireille Katarina woke up before the crack of dawn every morning. By the time the sky started to be colored by the sun, she was dressed and ready to preside over the morning assembly, which gathered the house’s staff and its chamberlain. While dealing with the household matters was not technically Mireille’s job anymore, she felt it was still necessary. Ellie only kept a few trusted people by her side, so they were understaffed. Besides, Mireille couldn't keep track of everything that happened on her own, so she had to rely on the workers' reports.

"That is all, Miss Mireille," the chamberlain concluded.

"Thank you. I'm counting on you all to accomplish your work seamlessly today too."

After the assembly, Mireille returned to her room under the pretext that she had some work to finish. The truth, however, was that it was now time for her to listen to the reports of those in charge of "unofficial" work and give out new assignments if necessary. As soon as she closed the door of her room, she felt a presence in a corner.

"Your report, please," she said, without looking that way.

"We've captured intruders who were trying to get into the mansion during the night."

"Do you know who sent them?"

"Yes. Someone from the Lauria Commercial Firm."

"Was their target Miss Ellie?"

"No. They seem to have been trying to steal information about how we make our cosmetics."

"I see. In that case, there is no need to kill them. Hand them over to the city guard."

"Understood."

The presence vanished and Mireille let out a weary sigh. It wasn't the case this time, but many entities were after Ellie's life. Most were vengeful merchants or nobles whose interests were threatened by Traitre's expansion. In most cases, those who evaded the mansion's vigilant guards were caught by the underground expert Mireille had hired, but once in a while, one of them managed to get close to Ellie. Mireille couldn't let her guard down.

"I still have some time until breakfast," Mireille noted.

When her morning routine went off without a hitch, like today, she sometimes found herself with a bit of extra time in the morning. Whenever that happened, Mireille liked to enjoy a nice cup of tea. She walked over to her personal collection of tea sets in the corner of her room and picked out the one she'd purchased in Kellevan. Unlike the simple tea sets one could usually find in the empire and kingdom, this foreign tea set from beyond the desert was adorned with drawings of flowers and small birds. Mireille then opened another drawer, which was filled with an assortment of teas, herbal brews, and even coffee beans.

"I'm in the mood for Earl Grey today."

She chose one of the packets of tea and meticulously brewed herself a pot. After partaking in the magnificent flavor of Earl Grey tea, Mireille left her room once more. As always, she split her time between her work for the firm, attending to Ellie, and teaching Misha. Before she knew it, most of the day had passed. She was done with her work for the firm, but there was still much to take care of in the mansion. Before that, though, she needed a small break. She was resting in a lounge reserved for important employees when Arnaud, the butler, joined her.

"Good work today, Miss Mireille."

"Likewise. Would you care for a cup of tea?" she asked.

"I'll have one, thank you."

The two sat across from one another. They sipped on the tea Mireille had brewed while enjoying some sugar cookies Arnaud had bought from one of the capital's most renowned patisseries. As Mireille took in the fragrance of the black tea, her mind wandered to a conversation she'd had not too long ago.

Shortly after Ellie and the others returned to the capital, Barl, who'd been away on Ellie's orders, also arrived. Mireille visited him to hear his report and found him sprawled out on a sofa.

"I'm sorry for the wait," she said.

"Nonsense, I barely waited. Isn't the missy with you?"

"Barl, how many times must I tell you to address her properly? Well...I suppose you won't change your behavior regardless, will you? Miss Ellie is busy inspecting Traitre's store, so I came in her stead."

"Okay," Barl said, shoving a piece of cake in his mouth before washing it down with a mouthful of lukewarm tea. "As the missy wished, we fanned the flames in Baron Lockit's territory. Once the masses were as unhappy as could be, we only had to light a match for an insurrection to break out. We took advantage of the chaos to sneak into the baron's residence and kill him before retreating. I'll put the gold we stole from his house in the treasury soon."

"Understood. No need to bring the full amount; half will suffice. Share the rest with your men."

"Thanks. The lads will be over the moon when I tell 'em."

"I'm asking just in case, but you weren't seen by anyone, were you?”

“Don’t worry. We took care of all the witnesses.”

“All right. I’ll report all of this to Miss Ellie. You’re free to rest for three days. After that, please handle the firm’s guard until she has a new assignment for you.”

“Gotcha.” Barl wolfed down the last of the cake and looked at Mireille. “Say, lassie, is the way we’re going about this really the right one?”

“Why do you ask, Barl? Are you dissatisfied with Ellie’s plan?”

“That’s not it. I’m just like you, you know? She rescued me when I was wasting away. As long as she orders it, I’d do anything, kill anyone. My men are the same. I’m just worried about her sanity. You know how she is, don’t you? She can’t resist extending a helping hand to those in trouble. But now that she’s out for revenge, she doesn’t bat an eye no matter how many people die, so long as they’re not close to her. She hasn’t noticed that contradiction herself, but the imbalance will eventually get to her. The missy’s influence has been growing, sure, but to what end? To get back at these pieces of trash in Haldoria? What kind of life is that?”

“Well...”

“I’m not saying she’s gotta give up on revenge altogether. But she can’t live for the sake of that alone. She’s finally free from that damned country. She should enjoy life a bit.” Having said his piece, Barl gulped down the rest of his tea. It was completely cold now.

“I... I also noticed the contradiction in her behavior,” Mireille said. “But when she’s done taking revenge, I’m sure she will—”

“Feel better and finally start living her life fully? Let’s hope. But what if she burns herself out before that? And when her hatred finally cools and the guilt that’s been hiding behind it spills out, what will happen? Who will hold her together then?”

“That’s...”

“I wish I could say *we* would. But the missy’s a woman of great caliber. The few of us on her side won’t be enough to fulfill her.” Barl stood up. “That’s it. I’m done reporting.”

“Thank you for your work, Barl.” Mireille paused before adding, “I’ll think about what you said.”

“I’ll leave it to you, then. You two are close, so who knows? You may be able to get her to find herself a new raison d’être—something *positive*. Anyway, if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“I will.”

“Are you all right?” Arnaud asked, looking at Mireille’s pensive face in concern.

“I’m fine. I was just thinking about something Barl told me.”

Mireille looked back at Arnaud. He’d served noble men and women as a butler for a long time, and Ellie trusted him very much, so Mireille decided to confide in him. Arnaud listened to her intently. When she was done, he nodded before leaning back in his chair.

“There is much truth in what he said,” Arnaud declared. “I don’t believe Miss Ellie was any better off in the kingdom when she was still Lady Elizabeth, but...while she has grown in vitality and dynamism, her mental state certainly feels unstable.”

“Miss Ellie is unleashing a truly cruel retribution on the kingdom, while her heart bleeds for the suffering of the people in the empire. Every person has several sides, and that is not an issue by itself. The problem is that she has not noticed her inconsistencies at all,” Mireille replied.

“Indeed. She does not seem to care for the suffering of the kingdom’s subjects because of her betrayal, yet she has remained as compassionate as ever here in the empire. She feels compelled to protect the weak.”

“Who can say when that precarious balance will collapse? And what will become of Miss Ellie’s heart when that happens?” Mireille sighed. “Barl was right. We must do something before it’s too late, right?”

“It appears to me that Miss Alice may very well bring her the emotional support she so desperately needs. If Miss Ellie continues to deepen her bonds with her, Miss Lunoa, Misha, and the new friends she made, she’ll eventually find a new purpose in life—one that is tied to her day-to-day life instead of revenge.”

Mireille nodded, then spoke. “It may be shameless for me to say, considering I’m the one who pushed her onto this path of vengeance, but I just want her to be happy.”

Mireille looked utterly lost. She would never have shown such weakness in front of Ellie. Arnaud smiled at her and poured her a fresh cup of tea.

“She would have just continued being used by the royal family and the duke if she'd remained in the kingdom. You weren't mistaken, Miss Mireille," he said.

"Excuse me," Mireille said, knocking on the door of Ellie's office. She waited for her mistress to say she could enter, then pushed the door open. Inside, Ellie was busy scrutinizing a map of the capital with a few employees from the firm.

"Miss Ellie," Mireille said.

"Oh, there you are, Mireille. You came at the perfect time."

"For what?"

"We were going over my plan for Alice's first errand."

"Is that so?"

Barl and his men had spent the past week clearing the area surrounding the market of vagabonds and delinquents. On the day of Alice's errand, staff from Traitre, along with Marty from Sharp Edge and Tida, would be dispatched to survey the area.

"But what if Alice loses the list along the way?" Ellie asked.

"One of the staff in the area can give her a spare one."

"Nice thinking!" Ellie and the others were hammering out of the details of Alice's very first chore. Once they were about done, Mireille asked Ellie to dismiss the rest of the staff so she could deliver her report. When the two of them finished their discussion, Misha brought them coffee.

"Hmm? Did you change the coffee beans?" asked Ellie.

"Yes," Mireille answered promptly. "One of Haldoria's vassal countries in the south of the Central Continent started cultivating this variety, so I purchased a sample batch. It was expensive but much less so than importing beans from the Southern Continent. I tried it myself and found it satisfactory, but if it's not to your taste, I'll make sure you're not served coffee made from these beans anymore."

"No, it's fine. This isn't bad," Ellie replied. She took a few more sips, then seemed to remember something. "Mireille."

"Yes, miss?"

"You're off this afternoon, aren't you?"

"Indeed. This report was my last task for the day."

"I see. You've been busy these days, so I hope you are able to rest well this afternoon."

"Thank you. I was thinking of going shopping. It has been a while since I last strolled through the shops of the capital. Speaking of which, what do you usually do on your days off, miss?”

“Me? Well, I...do market research and develop new products.”

“That’s work, miss.”

“I-I suppose you’re right...”

“Why not use that time to strengthen your bonds with your friends from time to time?”

Ellie paused, surprised, then said, “You’re right... That could be nice.”

Mireille was strolling through the streets of the imperial capital, a little after noon. She’d left the main street behind, heading to a road lined with accessory shops and antique stores.

“Hello,” said Mireille as she entered an antique store that she frequented.

“Mireille! I’m glad to see you!” the owner exclaimed. “I have some new tea sets that I’m sure you’ll love.”

“Really?” Mireille approached as the owner selected a box from behind the counter. She opened it and showed it to Mireille.

“That’s...a glass teapot?”

“Exactly,” the owner said. “Straight from the eastern archipelago. See the pattern carved onto the glass? A great artisan cut each of the lines by hand.”

Mireille studied the intricate lines carved onto the lightly colored glass. “Wait. Is that...?”

The owner laughed. “I knew you’d notice. This is a magic circle. It keeps the tea warm.”

“That’s incredible,” Mireille said, impressed. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen magic teacups or teapots, but people usually hide the magic circle as well as they can. Keeping it in plain view in such an artistic way is quite novel.”

“So what do you say, my dear Mireille? It’s not often we get glass teapots from the eastern archipelago.”

“How much is it?”

“I normally wouldn’t part with it for anything less than six gold coins, but since you’re a regular, I’m willing to let you have it for five gold coins and five silver coins. How does that sound?”

“Hmm... I must admit, I’m a bit hesitant to spend that much.”

The price was a lot for a single teapot. But taking into account the care it must have taken to transport something made out of fragile glass from the eastern archipelago to the empire, and the fact that it was a magic item and not just a regular pot, it did make sense. Besides, Mireille had more than enough money to afford it.

"I'll take it," she concluded.

"We have a deal."

"But I don't have that much on me, so may I come back tomorrow to complete the transaction?" Mireille asked.

"Sure thing. I'll mark it as sold and keep it for you."

"Thank you."

Afterward, Mireille visited a few more shops, her spirits lifted thanks to the treasure she'd found. By the time she made her last purchase—tea leaves from a shop run by a friend—the sun had already begun setting, and she decided it was time to go home.

"Hmm..."

After returning, Mireille stepped into the living room and saw Ellie. She had her arms crossed and was so deep in thought she hadn't noticed Mireille coming in.

"Is something wrong, miss?" Mireille asked.

"Mireille? You're back?"

"I just arrived. You seem troubled, Miss Ellie. What happened?"

"It's just... You told me to deepen my bonds with my friends earlier, did you not?"

"I did."

"I was thinking about it, but...what should I do to achieve that?"

"Well..."

Ellie, betrothed to the crown prince of Haldoria from a young age, had spent most of her life under the scrutiny of Haldoria's high society. Every move she made was observed, and she had to always be conscious—and cautious—of what message she sent to others. Ever since childhood, her social relationships had been defined by politics and furthering her agenda.

*She doesn't know what a normal friendship is supposed to be like,* Mireille realized.

"I know!" Ellie suddenly said. "I should organize a party so we can exchange valuable information and—"

"Miss Ellie. That's how high society operates, not friendships."

"What about you? Do *you* have friends?" she asked, pouting.

*She would never have let herself show such an expression back in the kingdom,* Mireille thought.

"Of course I do," she replied. "People with the same hobbies as me, mostly."

Ellie's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Is it that surprising?" Mireille asked.

"I-I never thought you did..."

While Mireille wasn't very sociable by nature, she'd been working under Ellie for years. She'd learned how to communicate with people through her job.

"Miss Ellie, think of it differently. What would *you* like to do with your friends?"

"To do?"

"Well, for instance...shopping, or having lunch and chatting."

"I see! You're right! I don't need to worry about benefiting from every conversation or analyzing the slightest shift in people's expressions anymore!"

Mireille had a feeling that Ellie would be hard at work concocting a master plan to further her friendships, at least once she was done supervising Alice's first errand. But she decided not to touch upon that.

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"Alice."

"Yeeees!" The little girl's voice resounded in the courtyard. She turned to look at who had called her and saw Ellie and Mireille stepping into the courtyard. As soon as she saw Ellie, she beamed with happiness and dashed toward her as quickly as her little legs could take her. Ellie picked her up and patted her head gently. In her hair, Alice wore the ribbons she'd bought with Lunoa and Misha.

"I have something to ask you, Alice," Ellie said.

"What is it, mama?"

"You know where the market is, right? There are a few things I need, but we're all so busy we have no time to go. Could you please help me out and go?"

"Alone?"

"Yes. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes!"

Alice was over the moon. Ellie had given her her first task!

Alice carried a little bag of money draped across her torso and wore a sun hat with a wide brim. She clutched the shopping list Ellie had given her as she left the residence. Ellie's home was on the edge of the noble district, in an affluent neighborhood. This meant there were regular patrols, and public order in the area was top-notch. Ellie had decided to send Alice to the market because the path that led there was used by a lot of people and was safe.

While she'd been to the market with Ellie several times, Alice got confused and accidentally strayed onto a path she didn't recognize. There were plenty of people around, so she didn't feel like she was in danger, but anxiety started to bubble up in her chest.

"Wh-Where am I?" Alice wondered out loud. While she was feeling a little flustered, she didn't panic. She took a deep breath and observed her surroundings. She saw a blonde woman with long hair approach a guard.

"Hey! I've got a quest—" the woman started before immediately correcting herself. "Um, I mean, could I ask you a question, Mr. Guard?"

"Of course. What can I do for you, miss?"

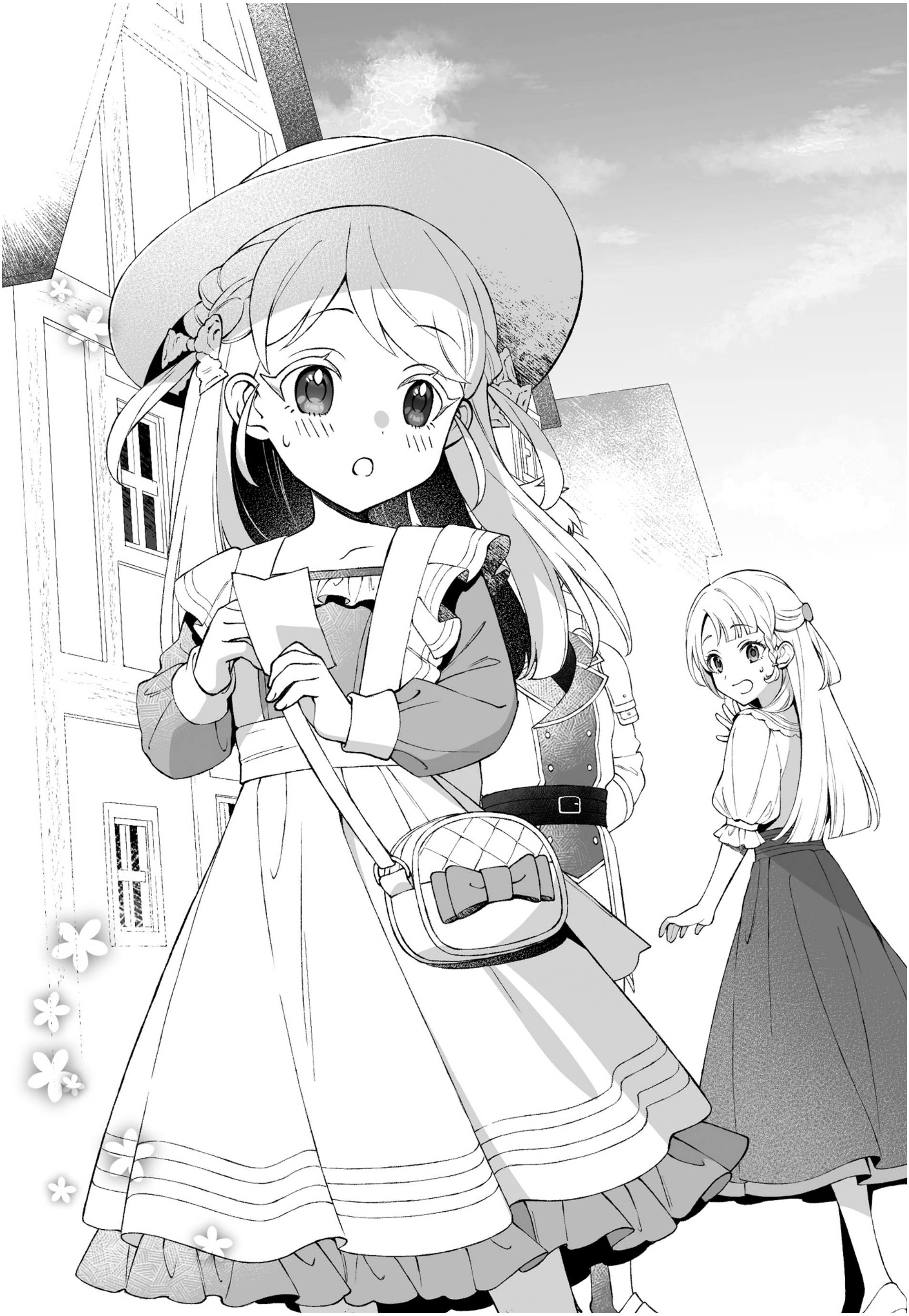
"Where's the mark— Um, would you be so kind as to tell me where the market is, please?"

"The market isn't on this street. It's on the next one," the guard said. "You have to turn right there and then walk straight ahead."

"Oh, I see!" she exclaimed, before repeating loudly, enunciating every word, "To get to the market, I have to *turn right* at this corner. Then I have to *walk straight ahead*."

"W-Well, yes," the guard awkwardly confirmed.

Alice turned her gaze to where the guard and the woman were looking. She saw a large crossroads. It seemed she just had to turn right there to get to the market. Alice followed the instructions she'd overheard and soon found herself in a familiar setting. She could see a multitude of shops ahead and a sea of people calling out prices left and right.



"Hmm..."

Alice looked at the list and walked into the first shop she needed to visit. After buying vegetables from the greengrocer and purchasing the variety of tea leaves written on the list, Alice reached into her pocket to check her next destination.

"Next is... Huh?! Where's my list?!"

She was sure she'd put the list in her pocket while she was buying the tea, but she couldn't find it anymore! She started frantically scanning the ground, but the crowd was too dense. The small piece of paper was gone. Alice was starting to lose her composure when a burly man called out to her.

"Hey, girl."

He was dressed in adventurer's garb and hid his face with a mask. That was somewhat suspicious, but there were plenty of adventurers who wore masks to hide scars, so this man didn't stand out too much. Alice doubted he'd try to do anything to her in such a busy street, but she was still on alert, just in case.

"You dropped this," he said, handing her a small scrap of paper.

"Ah!" Alice exclaimed, accepting it.

"Are you running an errand, girl? Be careful," he added, his voice muffled a bit by the mask.

"I will, thank you!"

Suddenly, a group of boorish men approached him.

"Huh? Isn't that the mask you had us fetch yesterday? And what's up with those clothes? What are you doing, Bar— Urgh!"

Before he could finish his sentence, the man with the mask punched him in the stomach. He seemed to have gone easy on him, because the uncouth man didn't topple over. He clutched at his stomach, looking puzzled. The masked man whispered something in his ear, and he and the rest of the group departed as quickly as they'd arrived.

"U-Um..." Alice let out.

"Don't worry, girl. They're...friends. We were just messing around."

"R-Really?"

"Yep. Anyway, you be careful, okay? Bye," the man said before leaving.

"I feel like I've seen him somewhere... Oh well, it doesn't matter!"

Alice looked down at her list. Somehow, it looked a little different from the one she'd had before. The items written on it were the same, though, so she concluded that it was probably her imagination. She bought the remaining items and returned to the residence.

"Mama!"

"Welcome back, Alice."

Alice gave Mireille everything she'd bought and jumped into Ellie's waiting arms.

"Did your errand go well?"

"Yes!"

Alice was very proud that she had accomplished this task on her own.

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Adel meticulously read through the document in front of her before signing it and pushing it aside. She'd been repeating that motion endlessly since the early morning, hunting for mistakes—and falsified data disguised as mistakes.

"Your Highness, here's the report you were waiting for."

"Thank you, Roselia," Adel said, accepting the piece of paper and taking a glance. "Ah, I knew that something was off."

"Indeed. There are clear signs that external agitators are behind the revolt in Baron Lockit's territory," Roselia said.

"The origin of the weapons is shrouded in mystery. Not to mention the fact that the targeted territory belongs to the father of the crown prince's fiancée. That cannot be a coincidence," Adel declared. She rubbed her temples with one hand as if to chase away her fatigue, while she held the report of the spies she'd dispatched all across the country with the other. "They've noticed similar warning signs in other places. There's no doubt about it: Someone is pulling the strings in the shadows."

"A foreign government, perhaps?" Roselia mused.

"That's possible, of course. But it could also be..."

*Elizabeth.* The name flashed through Adel's mind but never left her lips. She couldn't ignore that possibility. It was clear that *someone* had incited the people of the territory to revolt, but her spies had yet to discover anything about the origin of the weapons or the money that had flowed in. Adel had no doubt Elizabeth had the resources to put together such a scheme if she decided to.

Roselia understood what Adel had implied, and she furrowed her brow.

"Elizabeth always treasured the people of Haldoria. She pushed for the building and upkeep of public works, and she funded charity events directly from her own purse. Do you really think she would incite a revolt, knowing full well that many innocents would die?"

"Many commoners did die during the revolt," Adel replied. "Plenty were killed immediately during the clash between the rebels and Baron Lockit's army. But even more met their end afterward, when public order collapsed and plundering and assaults became commonplace in the territory's capital. Without their master, the remnants of Baron Lockit's army turned to banditry. They'd even started attacking people in neighboring territories before I was finally able to quash the disturbance with our national army. I agree this does not fit the image of the benevolent, charitable Elizabeth we know, but you must remember that she is a noblewoman."

"But—" Roselia tried to argue, but Adel cut her off.

"She might have never done anything so terrible before, but Elizabeth was born and raised as a noble lady. She was brought up to lead and to use others. Whether she's a good person or not hardly matters. Elizabeth knows the world doesn't run on empty ideals. Sometimes, you must dirty your hands and use vile methods to accomplish your goals. She won't hesitate to make sacrifices if she must. Elizabeth always had the resolve to kill one person if it meant saving ten. You do not, Roselia. That's why you weren't chosen to become my brother's fiancée."

"But...would she truly go this far just because Friede broke off their engagement?"

"Assuming this is Elizabeth's doing, I don't think she did it just because of that. I've looked into what happened. Elizabeth was locked up in a cell for over a month. My father and the prime minister were aware the entire time, but they didn't lift a finger to help her. I guess they thought she'd be able to figure things out herself. That's a good reason to be disgusted with them, wouldn't you say? Still, if that had been all, I think Elizabeth would have simply fled to a foreign country and kept it at that. She might have taken revenge on the king or my foolish brother and those who'd aided him, but she wouldn't have involved the common people. What drove her over the edge is what happened after Friede imprisoned her."

"Her firm being taken over and those hateful rumors," Maoran, Adel's waiting maid, chimed in. Knowing that this talk was likely going to last a while, Maoran had paused her work and brewed tea. She was in the midst of replacing the cold cups on Adel's and Roselia's desks with fresh, hot ones when she joined the conversation.

"Exactly," said Adel, acknowledging her input. "Popular sentiment started turning against her. And to make things worse, when my father and the prime minister returned to the capital, they started spreading even more rumors that tarnished her reputation."

"In order to conceal His Highness the prince's wrongdoings," Maoran added.

"Yes. It was an effective plan. They elevated my brother and his new fiancée by making Elizabeth shoulder all the blame. And the commoners eagerly bought it. Who doesn't love a good scandal paired with a Cinderella story? What they failed to consider, however, was Elizabeth's feelings. The prime minister seemed to believe that Elizabeth would happily accept the infamy for the sake of the kingdom and the royal family."

"That's ridiculous," said Roselia.

"Well, Haldoria was being run by idiots," Adel said. "They turned public opinion against Elizabeth and successfully made a true enemy out of her. Or at least, that is how I believe she feels."

"Do you think Elizabeth is behind the revolt then, after all?"

Adel paused. "Not just the revolt. I also think she had something to do with Robert Arty's sudden madness and the deterioration of our relationships with our vassal countries."

"That can't be!" Roselia exclaimed.

Maoran stared at her mistress, just as shocked as Roselia by her statement. Regardless of their reactions, Adel was all but convinced that she'd touched upon the truth.

"The first argument that supports my theory," Adel started, "is that the vassal countries that border the lands of nobles who took Elizabeth's side—and who have continued to claim her innocence to this day—have significantly less troubled relationships with Haldoria than the others. The second is that Elizabeth has yet to be found. Many people, beginning with the prime minister, have invested vast resources trying to locate her, but they've all failed. Even I have tried, to no avail. If I'm right about all this, however, Elizabeth may become my enemy too…"

The conversation had left a heavy atmosphere in the room, so Adel suggested they go outside for a cup of tea to refresh their minds. Roselia and Maoran followed her to one of the palace's courtyards.

Adel had crafted a safe zone for herself within the royal palace. She only allowed a select few personnel—people she trusted implicitly—to work there and had ordered that no one else be let through. This courtyard was part of that zone.

The sun had long since passed its zenith and was slowly on its journey to the horizon. Adel stopped in the center of the lush, picturesque garden, where light streaming through the tree branches reflected off the water.

She let out a deep sigh and grumbled, "Again?"

"It would appear so," Maoran confirmed.

"I really wish he'd stop," said Roselia.

"You'd think he'd give up after so many failures. Does he not have a working brain?" Maoran asked, her words oozing scorn.

"It's precisely *because* he doesn't have one that I was called back," Adel said. Her exasperated expression remained unchanged even as she caught an arrow flying at her forehead in midair. In the same breath, she unleashed the spell Air Slash without chanting. The right arm of the would-be assassin thudded against the ground, a second arrow still grasped in its hand.

As soon as the archer had drawn Adel's attention, several other hitmen emerged from the shadows and dashed toward her. She pulled up one of her sleeves, grabbed the dagger she'd hidden beneath the fabric, and sliced open the throat of the first assassin. After seeing that Adel was armed, the others immediately switched targets, aiming for Roselia and Maoran instead. Little did they know that Roselia's dress hid a whip, while Maoran had concealed long needles in her sleeves. As they realized their error, the assailants hesitated, and Adel used that opportunity to send them crashing to the ground before restraining them with her magic.

"This is the sixth time," Maoran noted, annoyed.

"And I have no doubt that this is once again a gift from my dear brother or one of his idiotic followers," Adel said.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take action?” Roselia asked. “If you told the king, you could have the prince removed from his position entirely.”

“The kingdom is in turmoil,” Adel replied. “This isn’t the time for me to show myself publicly.” Barely anyone knew that Adel had returned to Haldoria and now held her brother’s authority, as she’d taken measures to keep things quiet.

“I will need to use...*underhanded methods* to restore calm,” she continued, “and I fully intend to oust my brother while having him take the fall. So there isn’t much I can do with these assassins other than capture them and interrogate them. Before I can think of the future, though, I must figure out how to handle *her*.”

“You mean Elizabeth?” asked Roselia.

“Yes,” Adel said. “I must locate her and find out for sure whether she’s behind the unrest in the kingdom. If she’s simply living quietly in exile, that’s fine, but...” Adel’s voice trailed off. There were plenty of issues in the kingdom she needed to deal with, but she wasn’t all that worried about them. What truly frightened her was the thought of having Elizabeth as an enemy.

The three women were tying up the assassins and discussing their plans when another voice echoed in the garden.

“Oh no, Adel!” the man’s voice rang out, with the cadence of a thespian. “What in the world happened?!” It was the crown prince of Haldoria, Friede. He approached, looking at the assassins with a theatrical, shocked expression.

“Brother, you do know this area is private, correct?”

“Don’t be so cold, Adel! I’m simply worried about you as your brother. Now, now, let me deal with these ghastly assassins for you.” Friede raised a hand, and a group of knights who’d been on standby marched into the garden.

“There is no reason for you to trouble yourself over such a small incident, brother,” Adel replied.

As soon as Friede had arrived, Maoran had rushed away. Now, she returned with a squad of men. The group was composed solely of lower nobles and commoners, but they were all loyal to Adel. She’d picked them solely based on that criterion.

“Oh, I could never let measly commoners and lowly knights take care of such an important matter, Adel,” Friede said. “Don’t worry, dear sister. I’ve brought knights from respectable families to handle things for you.”

*The only respectable things about those thugs of yours are their families,* Adel stopped herself from shooting back. Instead, she ignored Friede and had her people take the assassins away. If she let them fall into her brother's hands, they'd be killed before they could utter a single word.

"Now that the matter is settled," she said, "could you please leave? You have no right to be here and no authority to go against my orders."

"You bitch! How dare you speak to me this way?!"

"You may have failed to notice, brother, but I'm terribly busy cleaning up *your* mess. Why don't you go play with that loose woman of yours in the meantime?"

"What?! Take that back immediately! How dare you insult Sylvia!"

"Let me tell you something, brother. I have proof that her accusations against Elizabeth were completely bogus. I already know those who gave false testimonies on her orders. The timing isn't right, so I'm letting her actions slide for now. But mark my words, Sylvia Lockit will get what's coming to her. Now stay quiet and stop getting in my way."

Friede groaned.

"Guards!" Adel called to a group of sentries who'd finally arrived after being alerted by all the noise.

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Technically speaking, these guards had failed their mission by letting assassins reach Adel. However, she did not rebuke them. She only allowed guards she trusted in this part of the palace, and considering the sheer number of assassins sent after her, it was not reasonable to expect them to block every attempt. Nevertheless, her thin security was exactly what motivated Friede to keep sending in more killers.

"The crown prince is leaving. Escort him to his room."

"At once!"

"Damn you! Let go of me!" Friede screamed as the guards seized his arms. "Don't you dare touch me, you commoners!"

While these people had indeed been born commoners, Adel had recruited them herself. They would not be swayed by a few words from the prince.

"Go on, drag him away," Adel ordered.

"Yes, Your Highness!" The guards swiftly ushered the continuously caterwauling Friede and his followers out.

Adel sighed. “I’m so exhausted. Yet here I am, with more tiresome plans lined up.”

“You’re seeing *him* today?” Roselia asked.

“He’s arrived in the capital,” Maoran said.

“And he contacted me immediately,” Adel confirmed. “I don’t exactly want to go, but I must. I’m the one who asked him to come, after all.”

“He is good at what he does,” Roselia said, “despite his personality...”

“Sometimes one has no choice,” Maoran replied. “You said he was the only one for the job, did you not?”

“That he is,” Adel said.

“Then I suppose there truly is no choice,” Roselia concluded.

Maoran had never met the individual they were talking about, and she couldn’t help but wonder why Adel and Roselia looked so worn-out ahead of time.

When the evening came, Adel headed to the drawing room to wait for a certain nobleman. She directed Roselia to sit next to her and asked Maoran to stand behind the two of them. Much could change depending on this meeting. If everything went the way Adel hoped it would, she’d soon be entirely rid of Friede and could officially become crown princess in his stead. If things went wrong, however...

“In the worst case, this nation will be split in two,” she whispered.

Her words startled Maoran, but Roselia simply nodded. They hadn’t waited long when they heard a knock. A maid opened the door and announced that their guest had arrived. Adel ordered her to show him in.

“It’s been a while, Your Highness,” he said. “It’s an honor to see you again.”

“It has been very long, indeed. I’m sorry for asking you to come all the way here.”

“Please don’t apologize,” the man replied. “I remembered you as an adorable girl, but I see you’ve grown into a lovely lady. I’d surmount any obstacle to heed the call of a woman as beautiful as you, Princess. I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing you in quite some time either, Lady Roselia. Your beauty shines across the room, as always. Oh, and I believe it’s my first time meeting the lady in the back. Would you care to get to know me over a meal, my fair stranger?”

“Eiwass, could you please refrain from hitting on my attendant?”

The name of the cheerful womanizer was Eiwass. At first glance, he appeared to be nothing more than a frivolous seducer who was anything but intimidating. In reality, he was a fearsome, very capable man.

“Do excuse my rudeness,” he said casually. “Anyhow, what use could you possibly have for a man like me who spends his time cooped up in his family estate? Do you perhaps want someone to read you poetry and praise your exceptional looks? If so, I, Eiwass, am the man for the job. As the nightingale of high society, I’d be happy to sing for you anyti—”

Adel interrupted him, her face stern. “You know why I called you, Eiwass.”

“An ordinary man like me could never hope to understand the wisdom of our sage princess. Would you be so kind as to enlighten me?” Eiwass spoke grandly, like an actor on the stage. Adel hated the way he masked his true intentions under that act.

“You know I dislike beating around the bush, so I’ll be direct. Where is Elizabeth?”

“My, does that matter trouble your noble spirit, Your Highness? It’s a shame to see such a downcast expression on such a gorgeous face. Oh, I know just the thing for you! There’s a delicious confectionery shop in the capital. I’d be happy to escort you there personally, if you’d all—”

“Eiwass!” Adel snapped, cutting off his inane banter. “I don’t have the time to listen to your nonsense. Tell me where Elizabeth is.” She glared at him, letting her bloodlust seep out unchecked, but the smile plastered on Eiwass’s face didn’t break.

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Highness, but how could I know things that the lords and ladies of the radiant capital don’t when I’ve been hiding away in the countryside to run my father’s estate for all this time?”

“And more nonsense. There’s no way *you* don’t know.” Adel took a deep breath to ground herself. She couldn’t let Eiwass wrest control of the conversation from her. If she showed weakness, he’d easily grab the reins and pull their talk whichever way he desired.

"Eiwass, I'll be direct."

Adel's magic surged and the pressure in the room became unbearable, but Eiwass looked unbothered. "Come to my side," Adel urged him.

Eiwass's smile finally disappeared, and he looked at Adel and the others as if he were carefully appraising their value.

"May I ask you a few questions, Your Highness?"

"Go on."

"Why?" he simply asked. "You had a pleasant life on the Southern Continent, did you not? Why heed His Majesty's call and go through all this trouble? What are you hoping to accomplish?"

"I'm doing it for the people," Adel replied. "Only suffering awaits them under the rule of my foolish brother, and my father isn't much better. I was born into the royal family of Haldoria, and as such, protecting my subjects is my duty. If I must depose my father and brother to do so, I will. I swear on my pride and on the blood that runs through my veins that I'll forever be an ally of the Haldorian people."

"Your pride?" Eiwass repeated after a pause.

"Yes, my pride. I've lived all of my life thanks to the hard work of the people, and I'll serve them until I've repaid every last drop of their sweat."

"No happiness awaits you at the end of that path," Eiwass said.

"I suppose you're right. Even so, I cannot let this kingdom continue on the path to ruin— No, I worded that poorly. I don't care about the kingdom. All I desire is to protect the people who live in it."

"And you're asking me to devote myself to this cause too?"

"I am. Troubled times lie ahead. I'll need your strength to overcome them."

To vanquish the obstacles that lay ahead of her, Adel was ready to swallow the deadliest of poisons—Eiwass. There was no trace left of the meek smile he'd been wearing at first. His eyes reflected his ironclad determination and piercing intellect.

"Are you truly ready to face the woman you loved and revered like an older sister?" Eiwass asked.

Adel gasped. "I knew it. It truly was her." She took a moment to digest the harsh truth, then continued, "I need you even more now that you've confirmed it. Eiwass, come to my side. I need you to save this country."

"Fine, I shall pledge myself to you, for now. But if I find you're not worthy of my loyalty..."

"You may kill me in my sleep if that time ever comes."

Eiwass let out a hearty laugh at Adel's words. Then, he spoke.

"The Traitre Commercial Firm?" Adel repeated.

"Indeed. It's a rather new firm from the Yutear Empire. It operates mainly from the imperial capital and Lebrick Margravate. And the name of its head is Ellie Leis."

"Ellie Leis... Elizabeth Leiston." Finally, Adel possessed the piece of information she'd been searching for. Sadly, her theory was correct. Elizabeth was after the destruction of the Kingdom of Haldoria. She was in the midst of building up her power to get revenge. If Adel didn't fight her in earnest, the kingdom was doomed.

As he beheld the resolve in Adel's eyes, Eiwass allowed a daring smile to creep onto his face. He knelt in front of Adel.

"I've witnessed your determination, Your Highness. As long as you continue to hold fast to it, I, Eiwass, shall swear fealty to you."

◇

Mireille had told me to spend some time with my friends. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't sure *why* she wanted me to do that, but I could tell she had a good reason—and that it was probably for my sake. Mireille was my waiting maid, but she was also like a childhood friend to me. I loved her like a sister—she was my family. I knew she was always thinking about my well-being. In fact, it was only thanks to her that I'd been able to realize how poorly I was treated in the kingdom. So even if I didn't know why, I knew I had to trust Mireille and deepen my bonds with my friends, just as she'd suggested.

"But what do friends do together?" I whispered to myself.

Until now, I had never spent time with people just for the sake of enjoying myself. I'd been torturing myself, trying to figure out the answer to my conundrum, when Mireille had come home and given me some advice. After that, I had devised a plan. Once I'd consulted Mireille a few more times, I decided to put it into action during my next day off.

"Sorry for the wait, guys!" Tida exclaimed, running up to us. Today, Tida, Yuu, and Elsa—the comrades with whom I'd gone dungeon diving—had joined me. We'd planned to meet in front of the fountain, at the foot of the large clock tower, and Tida was the last to arrive.

"You're late, Tida," said Elsa.

"Over ten minutes late, actually," added Yuu.

"I couldn't help it! The only clock in the city is in this square!"

"Now, now, don't make such a racket," I said. "Let's go."

"Y-Yeah, exactly!" Tida happily agreed. "Let's go!!!"

"Good grief..." Elsa sighed.

Tida laughed. And so our rambunctious group started strolling through the streets of the imperial capital.

"There! Look at these fruits! You don't often come across them in this area," Yuu told us.

"Chirums, right?" I asked. "I saw an image in a reference book once."

"Are they tasty?" Elsa asked.

"I wonder," I replied. "I've never eaten one."

"Me neither," Yuu said. "I've only ever used dried chirums to prepare drugs."

"Then let's buy one to have a taste!" suggested Tida.

A copper coin was enough to purchase one of the red, ripe fruits, and Elsa took out her knife, quickly slicing it into chunks.

"It's sweet," I said.

"It has a wonderful depth of flavor," Elsa added.

"The aftertaste is super sugary too," Tida said.

"I feel like it would taste better in a cake, rather than just eating it as is," Yuu commented.

"That's a great idea," I said.

The four of us had planned to meander through the capital for a while before going to Yuu's store for a "girls' gathering," as they called it. We planned to cook dinner ourselves, so we could also bake some sweets while we were at it.

We purchased a few more fruits, as well as ingredients for dinner. When we'd finished shopping for food, we looked through the rest of the stalls in the market. We checked out knives that intrigued Elsa and foreign herbs that Yuu happily gave an extended commentary on. All the while, we had to stop Tida from dashing to the nearest liquor stall.

Time flew by in the blink of an eye.

*So this is what it feels like to walk around with friends, without any particular goal. I think I might rather like it.*

“I’m starting to get hungry,” Yuu said.

“Me too!” Tida exclaimed. “Let’s go grab lunch somewhere.”

“Does anyone know a good restaurant in the area?” I asked.

“I only ever go to cheap taverns full of adventurers...” Elsa admitted.

“I know all the best bars in the area,” Tida bragged.

I usually ate at home or at parties, so I didn’t know many restaurants.

Seeing us hesitate, Yuu let out a little laugh and proudly said, “Come on, I’ll take you to one of my favorite places.”

I knew from the time we’d spent together in the dungeon that Yuu was a food connoisseur. If she recommended a restaurant, I had no doubt it would be stellar. We followed her and entered what seemed to be a very ordinary eatery. It was the sort of place that served full meals during the day and focused on alcohol at night.

“Hello.”

“Welcome, Miss Yuu.”

“I’ve brought some friends today.”

A stout woman welcomed us in. I could see a bald man holding a frying pan in the kitchen at the back. I assumed he was the woman’s husband. We ordered the day’s special and found a table. As we chatted idly, the woman brought us our food.

“It looks great,” Elsa said.

“It really does,” I said.

Today’s special set meal included a salad, deep-fried meat from a bird monster, soup, and bread. At first glance, the menu didn’t appear to be anything special, but I noticed both medicinal herbs and fragrant herbs in the salad. There were also plenty of herbs used in the batter of the deep-fried dish. The meat of this particular species of bird monster was known for its foul odor, but I couldn’t smell it at all thanks to the spices used. I couldn’t tell what was in the soup exactly, but it tasted rich.

“What an interesting way to cook,” Tida said.

“Indeed, it’s my first time having anything of the sort,” I agreed.

Elsa nodded. “Yeah, it all tastes good, but these are definitely not the kind of dishes you often see around here.”

“Heh heh,” Yuu laughed. “The truth is that I came up with the dishes this place serves.”

“Huh?” Tida let out.

“I see...” I said. “No wonder there are so many medicinal herbs in the food.”

“In my country, we believe that the food you eat should keep you healthy,” Yuu explained. “That’s why I decided to incorporate medicinal herbs into the recipes. They’re great for maintaining your figure and improving skin health, so this place has become quite popular with girls.”

I took a look around and noticed that Yuu was right. Most of the other patrons were women. As we ate, Yuu explained to us the effects of each dish. We savored each bite of the meal, chatting the entire time.

“Miss Ellie, do you eat out often?” asked Tida.

“Not anymore,” I replied. “When I first arrived in the empire, Mireille and I would eat out almost every day.”

“Speaking of Miss Mireille...”

Our idle talk continued without pause even as we ended the meal with a cup of herbal tea.

Finally, when we were all done, Tida asked, “So, what do we do next?”

“Hmm...”

We didn’t have anything planned for the afternoon. We’d be heading to Yuu’s shop in the evening, but until then, we were completely free. I’d tried to make a clear schedule for the day ahead of time, but Mireille had stopped me. According to her, deciding what to do together was one of the fun parts. I’d trusted her and had taken the challenge of going into the day with no set plans. As we were discussing ideas, someone interrupted us.

“Excuse me...” The voice belonged to a blonde elven girl whose hair was adorned with ornaments resembling feathers. She looked to be about fifteen years old, but since elves lived longer and matured more slowly than most races, her appearance wasn’t necessarily indicative of her real age.

“My name is Rosa,” she said. “I’m a novice minstrel.”

*A novice? She’s most likely young, then. Though I suppose elves* *might start learning a trade later in life since they live far longer*, I thought.

"And? Did you need something?" Tida asked.

"Well... I... Hmm... Are you adventurers?"

"Something like that, yeah," Elsa replied. Tida and I weren't, but explaining our situations in detail would be too complicated.

"Would you be so kind as to recount your adventures to me?" Rosa asked.

We looked at one another. Minstrels traveled the land, composing songs about everything they saw and heard. Since Rosa had gone out of her way to ask us for stories, we decided to tell the tale of our recent dungeon dive. To thank us, Rosa performed a few songs. She was still new to this trade and seemed tense, but she had a dulcet voice. There was a peculiar charm to it that somehow made feelings well up within my chest as I listened to her. One day, she would become a famous minstrel; I was sure of it.

After parting with Rosa, we went back outside and ambled through the streets while continuing to shoot the breeze. Eventually, we arrived at Yuu's shop, where we prepared dinner and sweet treats with the ingredients we'd bought. I'd brought chocolate to share, Elsa had brought black tea, and Yuu brewed us some medicinal tea. We set everything on the table alongside the dishes and cakes we'd just made.

Once we were done cooking and arranging everything on the table, we dug in. Surprisingly, Tida turned out to be the best cook among us.

"I used to cook a lot when I still lived at the monastery," Tida said.

Incidentally, the runner-up was Yuu. She and Tida were as talented as professional cooks. In comparison, Elsa and I had ordinary skills.

As we ate, we talked in between every bite. I had always heard that commoner women were chatterboxes without truly comprehending it, but I now understood why they talked so much. It simply was a lot of fun.

Eventually, the topic turned to Yuu's homeland.

"You're from the eastern archipelago, right?" I asked.

"I am," Yuu replied. "My country, the Archipelago of the Rising Sun, was founded eighteen hundred years ago by the hero who defeated the demon king. He gathered people who'd lost their own nations, along with oppressed demonkin, and gave them a new place where they could all belong."

"That hero... He's the famous Hiroshi Saitou who came from another world," I said.

"Yes, he's the revered forefather of my nation," Yuu replied.

"So the hero founded the eastern archipelago, huh? What kind of country is it?" Elsa asked.

"A great one, if I do say so myself," Yuu said. "The sea surrounds it on all sides, and there are many mountains. We also experience earthquakes fairly frequently."

"And you still call it great?" asked Tida after a pause.

"Why, of course," Yuu replied with a smile.

It sounded like a difficult place to live.

"While the regular natural disasters do bring hardships, knowledge is more advanced there than anywhere else in the world, thanks to the wisdom the great hero brought from the world of his birth. Our nation is built on that wisdom," Yuu continued.

"Knowledge from another world, huh? That sounds cool!" Tida exclaimed.

"Most of it concerns everyday habits. For instance, we know how to best preserve food or how to farm in mountainous areas."

"Oh, is that all? I'd already started imagining cool magic from another world," Tida said, disappointed.

"If you want to hear about something from the hero's world...he did leave us three treasures."

"Three treasures?"

"They're all things the hero had on him when he arrived in this world. Nowadays, they're revered as our national treasures. Once every five years, they're exhibited for everyone to see."

"They must be incredible objects," Elsa said.

"They are indeed! One of them is called the Book of Smartphone. Apparently, it's a great magic item that holds the knowledge of the other world! They say you can learn anything about medicine, farming, or even justice from it!"

"Why do you sound so unsure of what's actually in it?" Tida asked.

"Well, that's because no one can read the Book of Smartphone anymore," Yuu replied.

"It's a grimoire, isn't it?" I asked. "The royal family must have free access to it, at least."

"The thing about the Book of Smartphone is that it isn't a regular book," Yuu said. "In fact, it's nothing like what you must be picturing."

"What do you mean?"

Yuu showed us the palm of her hand. "It's a black board slightly bigger than this. According to legend, when the hero touched it, it shone and revealed otherworldly wisdom to him."

"Oh, then it must be a magic item that only responds to its owner," Elsa guessed.

"Right," I agreed. "It must have been crafted with magic from the hero's world."

"What are the other two treasures?" Tida asked, brimming with excitement.

"The second is actually an outfit," Yuu said. "It's a simple black jacket with golden buttons, an emblem sewn on the chest area, and matching pants. Apparently, the hero came to this world wearing these clothes and used to call them a *gakuran*. The real one is kept in the national treasury with the spell Status Preservation cast on it, but the members of the royal family wear copies to official ceremonies."

"That's so interesting," Elsa said. "The shape and fabric of those garments must be so different from what we have in this world."

"And the third one?"

"It's a doll shaped like a girl wearing frilly clothes. We call it 'Cosmos Hunter Galaxy Momo, Final Hunt Ver.'"

"What?"

"I called it a doll, but it looks nothing like the dolls little girls play with. It's quite elaborate and is made of a peculiar material, firm yet soft. The hero did not leave much information on that particular artifact, but according to legend, he often gazed at it when he was alone. The leading theory among scholars is that it may be a representation of a goddess from the other world."

"A goddess from his world, huh? The hero must have been a very pious man if he brought his idol along to this world and kept praying to it until the end," Tida said, impressed.

"As for the many outfits the hero made, they were passed down to the members of the Twenty-One Regal Houses."

"The Twenty-One Regal Houses? What are those?"

"They're the houses of the hero's—our first king's—descendants from each of his twenty-one concubines. On the Central Continent, I suppose you'd call them family branches. They're of a lower rank than the royal family, but the members of these houses do have a claim to the throne," Yuu explained.

"Twenty-one concubines..." Elsa repeated, horrified.

"With his main wife, that makes twenty-two partners, right?" Tida said. "That hero must have been quite the energetic man..."

Elsa and Tida both seemed put off by the sheer number of wives the hero had taken. I agreed that twenty-two was a bit much, even for a king—in times of peace, at least.

"The Archipelago of the Rising Sun was born out of the union of many races," I said. "At the time, the first king marrying a woman from each of these races and tribes was an effective way to promote unity and stabilize the country."

"While it's true that he may have had political motives, it is said that the hero truly loved each of his wives," Yuu said.

"He had a big heart too, huh?" Tida said.

"Anyway, what are those outfits you mentioned?" Elsa asked.

"The hero presented each of his twenty-two wives with a costume. His main wife received an outfit befitting a queen, the Sailor Suit, which is still passed down to the women of the royal family. The House of Tanaka has the China Dress, the House of Kamite has the Miko Costume, and the House of Mizuwashi has the Sukumizu, to name a few. Speaking of which, my family, the House of Kusunoki, is a branch family of one of the Twenty-One Regal Houses, the House of Amagi. The outfit passed down within the main house is called the Infirmière Dress."

"I see... Huh? Wait a minute! You're practically part of the royal family, aren't you?" Tida asked.

"I do share blood with one of the Regal Houses," Yuu said. "But at the end of the day, a branch family is a branch family. I don't have any claim to the throne. If I had to compare my standing to something familiar to you, I'd say my position is akin to that of the daughter of a duke's vassal."

"You're still from a very good family, then," Elsa said. "What brought you to the empire?"

"My dream was to become an adventurer, so I left home and came here. My brother will inherit the position as head of the family, and I have two older sisters too, so I was always fairly free to do as I pleased."

Yuu's stories about her homeland were all very interesting. If I ever had the occasion to, I wanted to visit. A country founded by a hero from another world was quite intriguing, after all.

When Yuu had finished her story, Elsa and Tida also spoke of their birthplaces. Elsa was from one of the empire's vassal nations. As for Tida, she was apparently from the Western Continent. When it was my turn to speak, I told them about Haldoria while keeping the details of my personal history to myself. All three of the women had access to robust intelligence networks—Yuu through the empire's Merchants' Guild Council, Elsa through her high-ranked adventurer connections, and Tida through the Church of Ibris. There was a chance they already knew my true identity, but just in case, I kept it under wraps.

Today was the most fun I'd ever had. Spending time with friends without constraints was freeing. Mireille had probably wanted to teach me about that feeling.

*It wouldn't be bad to spend more days like this in the future*, I thought.

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A young man sat on a bench in the town square, facing the magic railway station. He was in Lisbell, the central hub of a group of small city-states located in the wilderness. Haruto looked up at the fountain in the center of the square, his face weary.

He and his girlfriend, Iz, had visited the main tourist attraction in Lisbell before she'd decided she wanted to go shopping. She'd dragged Haruto along until, exhausted, he'd plopped down in the square to rest. While he sat, Iz was lined up to purchase whischoos from a famous teahouse.

"She's got too much energy," Haruto said with a sigh.

Without much else to do, Haruto focused on the bronze statues that adorned the fountain. There were four figures facing a dragon. These people had once destroyed a lair of dragon monsters to open a trade route through the wilderness. At the time, the city-states of the area had been destitute, but thanks to these heroes, they had developed and flourished over time.

A young man holding a sword and a shield stood right in front of the dragon. A second young man with a spear followed right behind him, while a young woman with a bow at the ready stood in the back. These three were the members of Dragon Bond, a Rank A party. Behind them was a girl wearing a pointy witch hat and holding a staff—the Merchant of the Wilderness, Lunoa Carlton, no doubt. Haruto had learned about her in history class. She was the disciple of the famous Silver Witch.

"Sorry for the wait!" said Iz.

"Oh! Did you buy the whischoos?"

"Yep!"

Iz had returned with the liquor-infused chocolates while Haruto was spacing out looking at the bronze statues. The two of them chatted a little on the bench. As they sat there, a blonde elven woman with feather-like hair ornaments started singing in front of the fountain. She alternated between famous songs and tales of old, her melodious voice echoing across the square. One of her songs, which Haruto had never heard before, was about a group of adventurers diving into a dungeon to look for medicine that could cure a strange disease. The story was enrapturing, and Haruto found himself listening eagerly. Once she was done, the woman bowed as the small crowd that had formed applauded. Haruto and Iz walked up to her and threw a few coins in the hat she'd placed on the ground.

"Thank you," she said.

"You've got a nice voice," Haruto said.

"The performance was wonderful!" Iz exclaimed.

"You guys are going to make me blush," Rose, as she'd introduced herself, replied. She let out a bashful laugh.

Haruto and Iz hadn't meant to merely flatter her, though. They both genuinely thought she was talented enough to become a star.

"That was the first time I've heard that dungeon story," Haruto told her.

"My grandma told me that story. She heard it from a small group of adventurers back when she'd just started singing."

"Oh! It's all true, then?" Iz asked.

"Apparently. The part about a strange disease appearing out of nowhere and killing several hundred people in the imperial capital is definitely true. And the story's from that time."

After talking with Rose for a bit, Haruto and Iz bid her farewell and boarded the train to return to the dukedom.

# Chapter 2: Journey to the United Beast Kingdom

I was in one of Traitre’s storehouses, checking a shipment of crates that had just arrived. I opened the neat packaging to reveal tons of glass jars and pots. As I looked through the inventory, Lunoa spoke to me.

“Miss Ellie, I’m done verifying the last box.”

“Thank you, Lunoa.” I took the document she handed me and signed it.

“That’s a lot of crates,” she said. “Are we really bringing all of them?”

“Yes. Since I’ll be part of the group, I can carry them all with my Grimoire of Mammon. These negotiations are a big deal for Traitre. So far, beastkin have only been able to use a handful of beauty products. If everything goes well and they like our new line of cosmetics, we’ll be able to secure *a lot* of new customers.”

I gave the piece of paper back to Lunoa, and the two of us returned to my office. Mireille and Misha were there, still hammering out the final details to free us up for the coming trip.

“How are things going?” I asked.

“Very well,” Mireille replied. “Business in the capital is stable, and the inspection that started when you acquired your Special License is finally over. We can leave the capital without any issues.”

Alice, Lunoa, and Misha would accompany Mireille and me on this trip. Barl would also be joining us.

I nodded and gave Mireille the list of products I hoped to sell in the Beast Kingdom. After reviewing it, Mireille passed it on to Misha, and the catkin and Lunoa both left my office.

Mireille waited until the girls’ voices had faded into the distance before whispering, “Are you quite sure about this, miss? On this trip...” She trailed off.

I immediately understood what she meant. While the primary goal of our journey was business, I had another objective: to take revenge on my father, Sieg Leiston, the prime minister of the Kingdom of Haldoria. Mireille was clearly worried about bringing Alice and the others under these circumstances.

"I know," I said. "But this trip will be a golden learning opportunity for Lunoa and Misha. It's not often they'd have the chance to participate in large-scale negotiations with firms from a foreign country. Besides, while I do intend to seize the moment if it presents itself, I doubt I'll be able to kill Sieg during our journey. He will be in the Beast Kingdom as an official envoy. That means he's bound to be tightly guarded."

I sat back in my chair and felt myself sink into the plush fabric. I extended my arm and grabbed the coffee Mireille had just set down in front of me. She always had perfect timing.

Having finished our preparations for the trip, the five of us boarded the carriage in the early hours of the next day. Barl sat in the driver's box and we embarked on our expedition. The carriage rocked over potholes in the path, advancing toward our first stop—Hammitt County. There, we'd charter a ship and voyage to the United Beast Kingdom.

The United Beast Kingdom was one of Haldoria's vassals. It occupied a peninsula, and as a result it engaged in a booming maritime trade. It even traded with the Yutear Empire despite the poor relationship between Haldoria and the empire.

The steady sound of the carriage wheels against the road was as effective as a lullaby for Alice. She drifted off right away, using my knees as a makeshift pillow. I suspected she hadn't slept last night due to her boundless excitement for the trip.

"Will we board a merchant ship?" Lunoa asked quietly, to avoid waking up Alice.

"Yes," I replied. "The empire has no diplomatic relations with the United Beast Kingdom, so there are no ocean liners that transport civilians from here. There are only two ways of getting into the country: go through the wasteland and seek entry through Haldoria, or enter through a port after boarding a merchant ship."

"I've already arranged for us to be granted passage on one of Count Hammitt's ships," Mireille said.

"Having connections is always useful," I said.

"The United Beast Kingdom is a country for beastkin, right?" Misha asked.

"Indeed. As its name suggests, it was born of the union of several tribes. The Beast King acts as their collective representative, but the real power is in the hands of the Elite Council—a group made up of the heads of the kingdom's tribes."

"Does that mean the king doesn't govern?"

"The Beast King is chosen for his strength, and he leads the military. However, he doesn't care to be bothered with political affairs and leaves all other decisions to his subjects."

"Can a country really function that way?"

"Well, I'm not aware of any big issues caused by the type of government they practice so far. Maybe that's because beastkin are naturally inclined to obey strength."

We continued to chat until we reached Count Hammitt's territory and entered Traitre's branch location. The ship we were planning to take would leave tomorrow, so there was no rush when we arrived. I didn't even need to perform my usual duty of greeting the count and his family at his residence, as they were currently away at their summer home. Free of that responsibility, I entrusted the staff of Traitre's branch with a gift and letter of thanks. I asked them to deliver both to the count upon his return. Then, I retired to bed early.

Before we departed the next morning, I let Mireille style my hair in front of a mirror. Usually, my locks had such a pale hue that they gleamed like silver under the light, but today, they were black. Mireille carefully ran a comb through my raven tresses, making sure the dark dye had coated every strand, before braiding it for me.

"Use this instead, Mireille," I said. The hair tie I handed her was almost identical to the one she had in her hand. The only difference was the texture. As soon as she saw it, though, her eyes widened in surprise.

"This one?! Are you sure?"

"Yes, just in case."

"All right."

Mireille secured my braid with the hair tie. The single plait rested on my right shoulder and sloped all the way down to my chest. Once she was done, Misha proffered a pair of glasses on a tiny tray. I put them on and looked at myself through the noncorrective lenses. Though my hair had a completely new, ebony sheen, my eyes were just as blue as always behind the glasses.

"How do I look?"

"Like a new woman. No one will know it's you at first glance," Mireille said.

"You look beautiful with black hair too, but why go to such lengths?" Misha asked.

"Back in Haldoria, I was acquainted with several important people from the Beast Kingdom. I have no plans to see any of them, but one can never be too careful."

I was going to the Beast Kingdom to conduct business talks, but there was no telling who I'd run into. As I stood up and lifted my braid, the texture of my hair felt the same as always, and there was no unusual smell. The dye did not stain my fingers either. I'd used a brand-new solution made by some of the talented craftsmen and alchemists who'd gathered to work on aqua silk. Needless to say, I was already in the process of turning it into Traitre's newest product—hair dye. We'd worked out the budget a long time ago, and we'd soon start mass production before launching it on the market.

"Do you think hair dye will actually sell?" Lunoa asked. She held the earthenware pot aloft, having picked it up after Mireille was finished with it.

"Commoners won't buy it," Mireille replied. "But I expect it'll become a popular product with nobles. With the ladies, first and foremost, but with the gentlemen too."

"Will men really purchase hair dye?"

"They will," she said. "Making sure one's hair does not turn gray and remains full is a mark of status."

"Besides," I added, "this hair dye has interesting properties thanks to its base ingredient: the branches and stems that remain after aqua crawlers feast on their favorite food, kaelia leaves. You may have heard about how kaelias are known for their ability to stock mana."

"I remember reading about that in one of the research team's reports," Lunoa replied, bringing one hand to her brow in focus. "The charcoal made from these branches can also suck up mana and store it—although for a limited amount of time."

"I'm not sure I see the connection to the hair dye," Misha said, puzzled.

"The alchemists used that attribute to make it so that this dye doesn't run unless you pour enough mana into it," I explained.

"Is that why it doesn't get on your hands even if you touch your hair?"

"Exactly. The only way to get rid of this dye rapidly is to pour a lot of mana into it or use magic water. Still, as Lunoa suggested, kaelias' ability to store mana is only temporary once they are cut. If you leave the dye alone, the color will start fading gradually after a month."

"Mana or magic water... Miss Ellie, this product is targeted at nobles, right?" Lunoa asked.

"Indeed."

"Most nobles can use magic, and I heard that those who cannot usually hire magically inclined servants. That means they'll be able to get the color off on their own whenever they wish. They won't technically *need* magic water. So how about we produce magic water with hair conditioning abilities and sell it in a set with the dye?"

I hummed. That was an interesting idea. Nobles could get their hands on magic water so easily that I hadn't considered turning it into a product. However, Lunoa's suggestion of marketing it as a two-in-one hair-care product and hair-dye remover made it a viable option. Lunoa was becoming a better merchant with each passing day.

"That's a great idea," I said. "Perhaps we could even make magic water that shares the properties of certain potions."

"Should I ask our alchemists to look into it?" asked Mireille.

"Please do, Mireille. In fact, if Yuu is interested, I'd love to make it a collaborative project."

I had a feeling that making magic water that both could remove hair dye and had the properties of a potion would be a difficult endeavor. If it succeeded, though, it'd turn into a lucrative business opportunity.

"If that goes well, I'll have to pay you a hefty bonus, Lunoa," I said.

"R-Really? Thank you!" she exclaimed, flustered. She probably hadn't expected I'd take her casual suggestion so seriously.

Mireille had just taken the small ceramic pot of dye from Lunoa and put it in her bag when someone knocked on the door.

"Mama!" Alice cooed, scurrying over to me as soon as Misha opened the door. Usually, whenever she did that, Alice leaped into my arms immediately, but today she stopped right in front of me.

She stared at me for a moment with a puzzled expression before saying, “It’s all black!”

“Yes, I changed my hair color.”

“I wanna do it too!”

“Huh?” I said.

Come to think of it, I’d read in a book that children often wanted to imitate their parents. It was an amusing request, and I usually would have granted it without a second thought, but I had no time to indulge Alice. We had to depart soon to board the ship bound for the United Beast Kingdom. Alice began adorably pouting as soon as I told her no.

“I’ll dye your hair black too when we get back to the capital, all right?” I said to pacify her.

Satisfied that we’d have matching hair once we got back, Alice finally sat down so we could have breakfast before leaving. After a quick meal, we headed to the port. I gazed out at the multitude of ships lined up in the harbor and spotted the one we’d be boarding—the Colfran.

It was a medium-sized merchant ship under the control of Count Hammitt. It carried trade cargo for the most part, but it also transported merchants looking to do business in the Beast Kingdom. Several other traders were already on board. As we approached, one of the sailors, who’d been busy checking the merchandise that was about to be loaded, took notice of us.

“Oh, hello. You must be the merchants Count Hammitt told me about. I’ll show you to your cabin; come with me.”

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“Hey! You wrap up here, all right?” he shouted to another sailor before leading us up a ramp onto the ship. We followed him until he eventually stopped in front of a door.

“Here’s your cabin. We could only spare one, though. Sorry about that. You can sleep with us sailors, mister,” he told Barl. This ship was never meant to carry many passengers, so there were few cabins and most were already occupied by other merchants. There was nothing we could do other than accept the current situation.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Barl replied with a nonchalant shrug.

The sailor left us to explore our quarters as he showed Barl to his hammock. We entered the cabin. It was rather cramped, with bunk beds on both sides.

“Lunoa and Misha, you two take the top bunks. Mireille, you take this one," I said, pointing to one of the lower bunks, "and I'll sleep with Alice."

"Yay!" Alice squealed.

I had started putting our luggage in order when the little girl tugged on my sleeve.

"Mama, can I go explore the ship with Big Sister Lunoa and Big Sister Misha?"

"All right, but make sure you don't bother the crew."

"I won't!"

"You two look after Alice, all right?"

"We will," Lunoa said.

"Yes, miss," Misha confirmed.

Alice grabbed their hands and dragged them out of the cabin. I barely had the time to add "Be careful!" before they were gone.

"I should go greet the captain," I said once I had finished organizing our belongings.

"Do you want me to accompany you?" Mireille asked.

"No, I'll be fine on my own," I replied before heading out. As I walked toward the captain's cabin, the air was filled with the booming voices of sailors shouting orders at one another as they loaded the cargo. I knocked on the cabin door, and a hoarse voice told me to come in.

"Excuse me," I said, pushing the door open.

Inside was a man who seemed to be in his forties. With one hand, he took a draw on a cigarette, while he scribbled something on a nautical chart with the other. He lifted his head, studying me with his sharp eyes.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ellie Leis from Traitre. I'll be in your care until we reach the United Beast Kingdom."

"Oh, right, you're the merchant the count referred to me."

I held out a bottle of strong brandy that I'd prepared for him. It was an expensive spirit I'd imported from the Northern Continent when we were researching liquor chocolates.

"This isn't much, but please accept it," I said. "I've taken the liberty of bringing some additional bottles for your crew."

He hummed, his gaze softening a little. "You're young, but you're already pretty thoughtful, huh?"

After exchanging a few more words with the captain, I took my leave. Before returning to our cabin, I decided to check out the stern of the ship. Right at that moment, I was lucky to see a pure-white seabird take wing off the mast. At the base of the mast, looking intently at the sailors verifying the state of the sails, were Alice, Lunoa, and Misha.

"Are these kids yours?" someone suddenly asked.

I hurriedly turned around to see a handsome man in traveling clothes strolling up to me, a smile on his face. He waved at me as our eyes met. The high-quality leather overcoat he wore was made from the skin of a desert monster. His attire and his dark complexion told me he was most likely from the Nile Kingdom, another of Haldoria's vassal countries. A few other things about his appearance caught my eye immediately, though. The man had one horn on the right side of his head, his ears were longer and sharper than those of humans, and I could see a wolf tail poking out from behind him.

In most cases, only humans could have offspring with other races. For instance, an elf and a dwarf could not reproduce together, but a human and an elf—or a human and a dwarf—could. When that happened, the children would either take entirely after one parent or have attributes of both races. It was incredibly rare, but when an individual born of such a union had a child with another mixed individual, they could give birth to what was commonly called a hybrid. Hybrids could have attributes from several races, and they often possessed exceptional physical abilities and magic. Many of the great heroes who'd left their marks on history were in fact hybrids.

"Those are my adoptive daughter and two of my firm's employees," I said.

"I see. I'm also a merchant. Are you headed to the United Beast Kingdom for business?"

"I am. But may I know who you are?"

"Do excuse me for the late introduction. I'm Egret Birch, the third head of the Birch Commercial Firm."

Egret extended his hand to me and I shook it, replying, "I'm Ellie Leis, head of the Traitre Commercial Firm. I hope you don't mind me asking, but I don't think I've ever heard the name Birch in the imperial capital. Does your firm operate in the Kingdom of Haldoria?"

"I guess my company is pretty much unknown in the empire," he said. "So far, we've mostly carried out business in the royal capital of the Nile Kingdom, but I'm trying to expand now that I'm the head. That's how I found myself in the empire."

"I see. Have you had any luck so far?"

"I suppose you could say luck finally smiled upon me, since I met *you*."

"Me?" I repeated.

"Well, you're famous, Miss Ellie Leis. You snatched a Special License so quickly after setting up shop. Not many can say the same."

"You speak too highly of me."

"Not at all. You're an esteemed merchant with considerable influence in the imperial capital. And with your beauty, I imagine not only merchants but also any man would be eager for a chance to speak with you."

"And you're skilled with words, as expected of a merchant."

Egret laughed. "Would you care to join me for a glass of wine tonight after dinner? To exchange information, of course. I regret not being able to invite you to one of the fancy restaurants in the capital given our current circumstances, but I'm sure basking in moonlight while feeling the gentle rocking of the ship upon the waves would make the alcohol taste even better."

I let out a little laugh. "I'm curious what kind of information you intend to use to lure me in."

"I know a fair bit about the United Beast Kingdom. In fact, I've dealt with several firms there. I'm happy to write you a few recommendation letters, if you'd like."

"Interesting. And what is it that you want to know in exchange?" I asked.

"Your type in men would be a nice start."

"I'm sure there's something else you want."

"An introduction to a big textile firm in the imperial capital would be wonderful. I'm looking to enter the empire's market with my dyes and fabrics."

"A few names do come to mind," I said.

"Then we've got a deal. I'll see you tonight."

"Sure."

Egret flashed a grin at me before returning to his cabin. He was definitely a little pompous, but I had to admit that he was attractive and personable. Speaking with him was far from unpleasant. He had a strong personality yet was strangely elusive.

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"Egret Birch from the Birch Commercial Firm?" Mireille repeated.

"The way he carries himself makes me assume he received a sophisticated education."

"I've never heard that name before," she said. "But then again, I suppose it isn't that strange if he's truly taken over his firm recently and has just started this new venture abroad."

"And being the third generation of a family of wealthy merchants, he would have received exceptional schooling." I called forth my Grimoire of Belphegor and summoned a saint bird. It perched on Mireille's shoulder. "Contact Arnaud," I continued. "Have him look into the Birch Commercial Firm."

"Yes, miss," she said, gently caressing the plumage on the saint bird's head before writing down a message for Arnaud on a piece of paper.

I started mentally planning my negotiations with Egret as I waited for Alice and the others to return.

After Alice, Lunoa, and Misha came back to the cabin, we began preparing dinner. It was a little early to eat, but considering this wasn't a passenger ship, food was our own responsibility—there wouldn't be anyone waiting on us. We'd be at sea for approximately ten days. I had plenty of food stocked in my Grimoire of Mammon, so I wasn't particularly worried, but I'd decided to let Lunoa handle everything so she could learn about travel preparations.

"Mister Barl, could you carry that box for me?" Lunoa asked.

"This one?"

"Yes. Misha, can you pass me the pot that's in your bag?"

"There you go."

Today was the first day of our voyage, so Lunoa was still able to use fresh meat and vegetables. She borrowed the ship's galley and quickly simmered some soup while Mireille and I heated up hardtack and poured the drinks. Once we were done, we carried everything back to the cabin. The confined space didn't even have a table or chairs, so we simply spread a picnic blanket on the ground before sitting down to enjoy Lunoa's soup. The tastes of the vegetables, mushrooms, chicken, and rich seasoning melded together in our mouths, and the warmth of the broth soothed our tired bodies.

“You’re off to drink with some guy after this, missy, aren’t you? D’ya need a bodyguard?” Barl asked, his words muffled by a mouth full of hardtack.

“No need.”

“Okay. I’ll be playing cards with the sailors, then. Say, you’ve got alcohol on you, right? Can you sell me some? Cheap stuff’s fine.”

“Of course,” I said, taking out several bottles of inexpensive alcohol, as well as one fancier bottle, from my Grimoire of Mammon. “I’ll deduct the price from your pay.”

“Thanks.” Barl shoveled the remaining hardtack in his mouth and grabbed the bottles before leaving our cabin.

Lunoa had made a lot of soup, and roughly half of the pot remained. She declared she’d add some milk to it tomorrow morning and turn it into stew for breakfast. To keep the food fresh, she put the pot in a well-ventilated spot for the night.

With her belly full and the rocking of the ship lulling her to sleep, Alice drifted away in no time. I tucked her into bed and left her in Mireille’s care.

“I’m off,” I said.

“Be careful.”

I nodded and headed out to join Egret.

When I came out onto the deck, I saw Egret toward the rear end of the ship. He was sitting on a wooden crate, which I assumed contained maintenance tools or something of the like.

“Hey,” he greeted me. “Beautiful night, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re right,” I replied, looking up at the sky. It was a cloudless night and the ship’s deck was bathed in the soft light of the full moon. As I approached, Egret removed his handkerchief and gracefully spread it across a second crate as if he were a nobleman pulling out my chair for me at a restaurant. If anyone else had done this, I would have thought they were putting on airs. But for some reason, I didn’t mind Egret doing it.

“I brought the best bottle I had with me,” he said, showing me a bottle of expensive wine from the kingdom.

While he poured two glasses, I took out the pricey cheese and the crackers I’d brought with me and placed them on a plate. Then, I accepted the glass from Egret, and we both raised a toast.

"To the good fortune that led to our meeting," he said.

"And to the profits that are sure to come of it," I continued.

"Cheers," we both said in unison.

We clinked our glasses and sipped. My nose took in the different notes of the wine's aroma, and I enjoyed the slight acidic burning sensation in my throat as I swallowed.

"It's delicious," Egret said.

"A very good wine, indeed," I agreed.

Egret sipped again, finishing his glass, so I grabbed the bottle and refilled it for him. He watched the crimson liquid fill his glass before taking a smaller sip and swirling it in his mouth for a moment, studying the flavor.

"This batch was made at a winery in Corstet, in the Kingdom of Haldoria," Egret told me.

"You're close, but that's not quite right," I said. "That winery changed hands when Lord Corstet brought it to his territory five years ago. Considering this bottle's vintage, it was produced before the move, back when it was still in Lord Haywards's territory."

"Hmm. You're quite knowledgeable about this, despite the empire and the kingdom being at war five years ago," he teased.

For a split second, I was at a loss for words. I'd been careless. It was peculiar for me to know that fact, but I knew I could salvage the situation.

"Every merchant is passionate about wine and card games."

"That's true. I'll leave it at that, then," Egret replied elusively.

I had to put my guard up. Anyone with a decent intelligence network could figure out my identity. In fact, I was fairly certain the entirety of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council knew who I was. If Egret was also aware of my identity, it was likely we had run into one another not by chance but rather by design.

I remained silent and ate a piece of cheese. Then, I started releasing more and more mana, increasing the pressure on Egret. He sighed and quickly raised both hands in the air.

"Wait, wait. I surrender! I'll confess, so please stop that, okay?"

I let my mana disperse and Egret took another sip of wine, cold sweat running down his temples.

"I thought I was about to die," he said. "I'll admit I already had an inkling that you had something to do with the kingdom. And I didn't run into you by chance; I boarded the same ship on purpose. But I promise I never had any bad intentions! I only approached you in the hope of striking a deal." Egret put a piece of cheese on a cracker and popped it into his mouth. He suddenly seemed to remember something and changed the topic.

"Come to think of it, I'd always heard that the head of Traitre had sparkling silver hair. Isn't that where your nickname, the Silver Witch, comes from? Though of course that obsidian hair of yours is plenty charming too."

"I dyed it," I replied. "My firm is in the process of developing a brand-new dye that works on hair. You could say I'm testing and advertising it at the same time."

"Oh, you dyed it? The color looks incredibly natural. Noble men and women seem to be so bothered by gray hair that I'm sure it'll sell like hotcakes. Can you do other colors besides black?"

"We're still in the research phase for other colors, so it's only black for now. I have high hopes that we'll be able to offer a wide array of colors in the near future."

"What a fascinating product. Once it's finished, I'd love a chance to make a contract with you before anyone else."

"My, you're even asking for preferential treatment now? Should I assume you're ready to fund our research?"

"Of course," he replied with a grin. "Just so you know, I'm not trying to undermine you in the empire. It's just that an exclusive contract to import that product into the kingdom would be stellar. Let's discuss the amount of that investment another day, all right?"

Egret had told me that his firm was based in the Nile Kingdom. I didn't know how much influence it had in Haldoria, but securing a firm that could distribute Traitre's product in the kingdom was definitely convenient. I knew that I'd need to either build up another firm from scratch or secure connections with an existing firm once I decided to seriously expand my business outside the empire. It would certainly make my life easier if the Birch Commercial Firm could become that connection.

"By the way, aren't Traitre's flagship products cosmetics? There isn't much demand for those in the United Beast Kingdom. They tend to dislike the smell." Egret's wolf tail shivered as he spoke. He didn't seem to like such products either.

"I have a completely new line aimed at beastkin. I'm wearing perfume right now, but you don't mind it, do you?"

"Seriously?" Egret asked, surprised. "I was convinced you'd only used skin lotion or something equally light."

"Do you know what this is?" I asked, showing him a handkerchief. The light-blue piece of fabric was not embroidered. The design was incredibly simple, but the texture was as soft as running your fingers through water.

"Wait... Is that aqua silk?!"

"Indeed. Production is finally well underway."

"Now you've got me truly and utterly surprised," he said. "This fabric is practically legendary! You can add that to the list of items I'd absolutely *love* to export for you. My homeland is hot and dry for the majority of the year. If we added a touch of cooling magic, nobles and royalty alike would jump at the chance to buy this."

"It's doable for alchemists to add enchantments. But could you sell to nobles and royalty?"

"Not to the royal family directly. But I do have connections with the royal family's official purveyor."

"Not bad."

I'd thought about doing exactly what Egret suggested before. With its harsh climate, the Nile Kingdom was the perfect place to sell aqua silk. But the Nile Kingdom was one of Haldoria's vassal states. Besides, it was located very far south. I couldn't easily travel there to negotiate like I was about to do with the United Beast Kingdom, so I'd shelved my plans to do business there.

"I'll consider it," I said. "Although it'll depend on the scale of the transaction."

"Oh, I won't be stingy. After all, I know I'll turn quite the profit no matter what with aqua silk." Egret and I continued to drink and talk business late into the night.

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The next day, I woke up feeling refreshed despite having indulged in alcohol for the first time in a while. Alice's eyes were already wide open by the time I woke up, since she had gone to bed early the previous night. Lunoa and Misha were still sleeping, while Mireille was up early as always. She had already gotten changed and was quietly preparing some black tea. I got out of bed and quickly made myself presentable before exiting the cabin with Alice. The sky was barely tinged with the dawn, and our hair fluttered in the crisp morning breeze. I felt someone approaching from behind and turned around to see Egret. He sported casual clothes and held a fishing rod he'd most likely borrowed from a sailor.

"Hi, Ellie. I had a great time last night."

"Me too. Are you going to fish?"

"I was looking for a way to kill time, and a sailor lent this to me."

"Fish?" Alice asked.

"If you put bait on this hook and throw it into the water, you can catch fish," Egret explained.

"Fishies! I wanna catch fishies too, mama!"

"Sure. I'll ask if we can borrow a fishing rod after breakfast, all right?"

"Yay!"

"I'll be fishing over there if you two want to join me," Egret said.

"All right," I replied.

Egret left and headed toward the stern of the ship while Alice and I walked to the front deck. As we watched the sailors cleaning the deck, Alice looked up.

"Mama, what's that mister doing?" she asked, pointing at a man at the top of the mast. It was the lookout, who was holding a telescope.

"His job is to look around the ship to see if there are pirates or monsters approaching so he can warn the crew."

Alice looked up at the top of the mast, her eyes sparkling with interest. I called out to a nearby sailor.

"Excuse me."

"Huh? What is it?"

"Would it be all right if we climbed up the mast for a short while?"

"What? You want to go up the mast?"

"Yes," I replied.

The sailor burst out laughing. He seemed to think I was joking.

"Ha ha ha! Sure thing! If you can get up there, that is. Don't come blaming me if you hurt yourselves falling, though."

"Of course not," I said. "Thank you."

Regardless of whether he truly meant it or not, I'd received his permission. I scooped Alice up and shrouded us with mana.

"Hold tight, Alice," I warned her.

"Okay!"

"Huh?" the sailor said, staring at us.

I kicked off the deck, making sure to hold back so I wouldn't destroy it, and leaped. I wasn't at full strength, so a single jump wasn't enough to get us all the way to the crow's nest. Instead, I landed on the metal fixtures that held the rigging and leaped a few more times until I reached the top.

“What the—?!” the lookout sputtered.

“Do excuse me. We won’t bother you for long,” I said.

I set Alice down in the crow’s nest but kept holding her hand. I couldn’t risk her falling from such a height. We took in the stunning view as the morning sun illuminated the sea. The rays of light reflecting on the surface of the water made the whole expanse look like a hoard of glimmering jewels. It was so awe-inspiring that words could not do it justice.

“Whoa!” Alice exclaimed.

The two of us stayed atop the mast for a little while, soaking in the gorgeous sunrise. Then, I picked Alice up again and jumped down after apologizing to the lookout. I looked for the sailor who’d given us permission to go up the mast and asked him if we could borrow a fishing rod before continuing our walk.

When Alice and I got back to the cabin, Lunoa and Misha were up. They’d already turned the soup from yesterday into a stew and heated up the hardtack.

“Welcome back! Was your stroll fun?”

“Yes! The sea was shining! And the sun went beeeeeam! And, and...”

While Alice excitedly recounted our adventures, Mireille handed her a glass of milk mixed with juice. Misha gave me a cup of coffee.

“So you watched the sunrise.”

“We did,” I replied. “The sun coming up over the sea was a magnificent sight.”

“Do you have any particular plans for today, miss?”

“I was thinking of fishing with Alice after breakfast. I asked the crew for a fishing rod.”

After we finished eating, we tidied up and grabbed the fishing rod before heading toward the back of the ship.

I greeted Egret, who had already cast his line, and we got ready to try for ourselves. I stuck a small piece of fish onto the hook as bait and gave it to Alice so she could cast it into the sea. As we waited for a fish to bite, I held her from behind to support her against the weight of the fishing rod. Next to us, Lunoa and Misha had joined the angling party, along with Barl. He was using a much larger rod and piece of bait, seemingly hoping for a big catch.

Mireille prepared drinks for all of us and put a hat on Alice’s head to protect her from the sun. As soon as she did that, I felt the line tightening.

"Wah!" Alice cried out, surprised.

I pulled the rod up to hook the fish, and the creature started thrashing about beneath the waves. Alice looked on in amazement as I pulled until I yanked my catch out of the water. It was a fairly sizable specimen.

"Ooh, that's a big one! That species is tasty too," Barl said.

"Really?!" Alice exclaimed.

"Yeah," he said. Barl deftly pulled the hook out of the fish's mouth and put our prize in a bucket. As he returned to his own fishing rod, he lit a cigarette. The moment he ignited the tip, I froze it solid with my magic.

"Huh?!"

"No smoking in front of Alice," I lectured.

"What?!" Barl reluctantly stuffed the cigarette into his pocket, and we continued fishing. Between all of us, we caught a whopping twenty-four fish.

By the time we reached the midway point of the trip, Alice and the others had adjusted to life on a ship. Since the previous day, I'd even started holding classes in our cabin to make full use of our time.

It was almost noon—time for a break in our lessons—and we went out to enjoy some fresh air. Alice and the others observed from afar as the sailors labored, while I spoke leisurely with Egret. Suddenly, the ship quaked beneath us. We all lost our balance and had to crouch with our hands on the ground to keep from toppling over.

"Wh-What's going on?!" asked Egret.

"These are no regular waves!" I exclaimed as the sea roiled beneath us, tossing the ship back and forth. I hurriedly looked toward the deck. Lunoa and Misha had grabbed Alice and were clinging to the rigging on the mast.

"Lunoa! Misha! Don't let go of Alice!" I shouted.

"We won't!" said Lunoa.

"Miss Lunoa! Let's secure Alice with rope!" Misha said.

"Good idea!"

Misha picked up some unused ropes and tied them around Alice's waist. On the deck, sailors were running around with panicstricken faces.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Without pausing, one sailor screamed, "It's a kraken clinging to the stern of the ship! If you don't want to die, grab onto something and hold fast!" He continued running toward the captain's cabin.

"A kraken?! Now, that's bad news," Egret said.

"I'm heading there," I replied. "Evacuate to your cabin, Egret."

"Stop talking nonsense," he replied, shrugging off my warning. "If you're going, I'm going with you." He unsheathed the sword at his hip. It was a peculiar weapon with a curved blade. If my memory served me correctly, this was called a shamshir.

Egret and I were about to rush toward the stern of the ship when the door to the cabins flew open and slammed against the wall.

"What the hell's all that ruckus?" growled Barl.

"Miss Ellie!"

"Barl! Mireille! Please take care of the children and protect the mast! A kraken appeared!" I started running before they could answer.

Egret matched my pace. "I get why you entrusted the children to them, but why tell them to protect the mast?" he asked.

"I've only ever read about it, not witnessed it, but in most cases of a large sea monster attack, gillmen are said to follow right behind. They hunt down whomever the first monster missed."

"Gillmen? They're pretty much the sea equivalent of goblins, right? Now that you mention it, I feel like I've heard of them targeting masts..."

"If they destroy the mast, the ship will be dead in the water. Once it's stopped, the gillmen will rupture the hull and we'll sink."

With Mireille and Barl there, though, I didn't have to worry about that happening. I just had to focus on the kraken. These fearsome monsters, which looked like gigantic squids, used their powerful tentacles to drag ships underwater. While the merchant ship we were on was rather large, it wouldn't resist the pull of the creature's gargantuan limbs for long.

After running up a flight of stairs, Egret and I arrived at the stern deck. There were humongous white tentacles entwined around the ship, trying to haul us to a watery grave. At the end of these tentacles was the body of the kraken, the upper half of which had emerged above the water. That part alone was as big as our ship.

A crowd of sailors armed with swords and spears were hacking at the monster's tentacles, but they were making little impact. The beast's suction cups were firmly attached to the ship and wouldn't let go. I dashed forward, unsheathed Flügel in a swift motion, and sliced off one of the giant tentacles as easily as if I were preparing calamari.

"You're good," Egret said as he imitated me and slashed off another tentacle with ease.

"So are you," I replied, returning the compliment.

Egret's swordsmanship was quite something. I already knew he was strong from the way he seemed to have sea legs despite the violent rocking of the ship. I hadn't imagined he'd be able to cut off a kraken's tentacle in a single strike, though. They were incredibly thick, and you had to get through the layer of viscous mucus protecting them.

Missing two tentacles, the monster weakened its hold on the ship, but it was only a short respite. The kraken immediately regrew its severed limbs and slammed them back onto the deck. It now seemed to register us as threats.

One of the tentacles the sailors had been tirelessly attacking lifted from the stern. I thought they'd finally managed to wound the monster, but it swept the sucker-lined limb across the deck, directly toward us. The sailors were sent flying, but Egret managed to cut off the vicious tentacle. The monster recoiled slightly, and I seized the opening. I materialized an ice spear and lobbed it at the kraken's main body. It landed and my ice started spreading from the point of contact, freezing it. To my dismay, the frozen area gradually stopped growing. The monster's regeneration had overpowered it.

"For some reason, I keep running into monsters with abnormally high regenerative abilities these days," I said with a sigh.

"Oh? So this isn't your first rodeo, huh?" Egret replied, teasing.

I let out a sarcastic laugh before scanning my surroundings for the sailors the kraken had sent flying. Luckily, none of them had fallen into the sea, but one was unconscious. On top of that, an uproar had started near the mast—that was most likely the gillmen attack I'd anticipated.

"We'll handle things here!" I shouted to the sailors. "Please go take care of the gillmen!"

"A-All right!"

Having sent the sailors away, I moved to stand next to Egret, Flügel in hand.

"Got a plan?" he asked.

"Well... Let's see what we can do."

◆

After Ellie and Egret ran off toward the stern of the ship, Mireille and Barl reached Alice and the others at the foot of the mast.

"If there's a kraken, gillmen might be next," Barl told Mireille. "Shouldn't we bring the girls back to the cabin?"

"No. It's safer for them to stay where we can see them. If the mast breaks, it'll spell disaster for all of us. Let's have them help us from the back."

"All right. Don't go running around, girlies, okay?" Barl told Alice and the others. He caught sight of the captain, who'd just come out onto the deck to direct his men, and shouted, "We're gonna be fighting too! Are there gillmen around already?!"

"Yes. My men saw them lurking underwater. Quite a few of them at that."

"Leave the mast defense to us. Your guys can focus on the helm."

"That'd be a great help. I heard from the count that you fought valiantly during the border conflict. I'm sorry for making you protect the ship when you're guests, but I have no choice but to rely on you."

"Sure, no worries," Barl answered. Only Ellie and Mireille had taken part in the border conflict, but Barl figured it was best not to correct him.

"They're coming!" screamed one of the sailors, who was surveilling the sea.

The next moment, a group of gillmen erupted from the water, leaping onto the deck. Gillmen were the size of goblins—roughly half the height of an adult man—with bodies covered in scales. Their large, bulging eyes surveyed the deck. They carried makeshift weapons made out of two types of material: iron they retrieved from shipwrecks, as well as ironshell—the shell of a species of conch monster. A few used turtle-monster shells as improvised shields, while others wore human equipment they'd most likely looted from previous victims.

"Some of them have pretty decent weapons, huh?" Barl said, assessing the situation. "I didn't think there'd be that many either."

"They're about to attack! Lunoa, Misha! Focus on protecting yourselves and Alice no matter what!" said Mireille.

While gillmen were often called sea goblins, they were an entirely different species. However, their habits were similar, and they, too, were fairly intelligent monsters. They were capable of learning, and their kind had discovered long ago that destroying a ship's mast prevented their prey from fleeing in most cases.

Barl let out a battle cry. Without even reaching for his sword, he stopped the gillmen who had lunged at the mast using only his bare fists. Those who'd advanced first wore the thickest armor and shielded themselves with turtle-monster shells, but that protection stood no chance against Barl's fists reinforced with mana. He broke through the monsters' defenses before shattering their sturdy scales. Then, he moved forward and pummeled a second wave of monsters in the same way.

Next to him, Mireille was also hard at work. She effortlessly dodged the gillmen's attacks before sneaking behind them to thrust her dagger in between their scales. She always aimed at their vitals, killing them on the spot.

"O whirlwind, fetter my enemies: Air Bonds!"

As Lunoa chanted, a small vortex formed at the monsters' feet, stopping them in their tracks. Misha took advantage of their immobile state; she leaped and plunged her dagger into one monster's eye, piercing through its skull. At the same time, the sailors were doing everything they could to protect the ship from the invaders. Leading them, the captain swung an anchor almost as tall as he was and crushed gillman upon gillman.

"Wow! You've still got it, old man!" Barl shouted.

"Hmph! Don't lump me together with those weaklings!" the captain responded, gesturing to his crew as he slammed his anchor into yet another gillman's head, turning it into mincemeat.

Suddenly, sailors came running from the staircase that led to the stern.

"Why are you here?! What happened with the kraken?!" the captain hurriedly asked.

"W-We couldn't handle it!"

"Two merchants are fighting it!"

The captain clicked his tongue before scratching the back of his head.

"You're so pathetic! And you still call yourselves men of the sea? Damn it! I'll go myself! You drag those idiots who passed out to safety, then fight the gillmen, got it?!"

"A-Aye, captain!"

Now that he'd made sure the gillmen were being dealt with appropriately, the captain rushed toward the back of the ship.

◇

The kraken's tentacles flew about wildly. If they touched us even for a brief moment, the suckers would latch on to us, and we'd be pulled underwater. To avoid that, Egret and I had to sidestep every attack or cut off the tentacles neatly when dodging wasn't an option.

"Can't you kill it with your magic?" Egret asked.

"I could, but the kraken is too close to the ship. If I go all out, I'll freeze the ship too."

"In other words, you can get rid of it as long as we find a way to drive it farther away, correct?"

"Yes. Ten meters would be plenty."

"All right, then. I'm on it."

"Can you even do it?" I asked.

"Probably," Egret replied, dashing toward the kraken and shearing off the tentacles that barred his way.

I didn't know how he intended to proceed, but if his plan worked, the kraken would move away from the ship. I started chanting, unable to let this opportunity pass.

The closer Egret got to the kraken's body, the more tentacles raged around him. Egret dodged them while making as few unnecessary motions as possible. He'd been holding his shamshir with his right hand this entire time, but he swiftly transferred it to his left before letting his mana surge.

Egret concentrated it around his right hand, chanting, "Divine Artifact: Starving Sahra." Condensed to the extreme, the mana took on the shape of a shamshir very much like the one he'd been fighting with. Egret crossed both shamshirs in front of him and ducked before leaping.

"Corroding Sahra."

Egret angled his shamshirs down and sand flew out of them, covering the tentacles that were still stuck to the ship. The sand started sucking the moisture from the appendages, drying them out. The kraken was so surprised that it retracted its tentacles and dove into the sea to wash them off. I didn't intend to allow it to do so, though.

"Monde Glacé!" I exclaimed. My spell flash froze over half of the monster's body, along with the water surrounding it. Krakens were so large and held such unfathomable quantities of mana that I couldn't kill it that way, but it was stuck in place and incapable of moving anymore.

Egret whistled, looking at the iceberg I'd created.

"Amazing magic. I see why they call you the Silver Witch."

"Your magic was quite impressive too. Sand magic is rare."

"Well, my homeland's practically covered in sand, you know? I grew up looking at so much of it that I can use it even with my earth attribute. The only downside is that my control isn't so good. I've got loads of mana, but I still can't manage sand magic unless I materialize my Divine Artifact first."

While we bantered, Egret and I jumped onto the iceberg and hewed the kraken's body open, destroying the magic stone inside of it.

"Hey, you two! What in the world did you do?!" said a voice from the ship.

I turned around and saw the captain gawking at us, astonished.

◆

Several vehicles were lined up in front of the royal palace of Haldoria. Most were sturdy wagons built to transport goods. Two-thirds of the remaining ones would be used to carry soldiers to guard the convoy, while the last few carriages were reserved for envoys.

It had recently come to light that weapons from the United Beast Kingdom had been used by the rebels against Baron Lockit. As a result, Sieg Leiston, the prime minister, had no choice but to personally lead the diplomatic mission to ascertain the beastkin's intentions.

"I bid you farewell, Your Majesty."

"I'm leaving this matter to you, Sieg," Bulat said. "I don't believe Leon could have orchestrated something so cowardly, but his country is far from a monolith."

"Indeed. That is why I must head there myself. I will talk to the Beast King and bring you the truth."

"All right. I'm sure I don't need to worry about you. But still, be careful."

"I will, Your Majesty." After bowing respectfully to his king, Sieg walked toward the waiting convoy. He'd only taken a few steps when a young woman called out to him. He stopped in his tracks, turned around, and bowed to her as well.

"Greetings, Your Highness Adel," he said.

"Lift your head," she replied. "You're off to the United Beast Kingdom, are you not?"

"I am, Your Highness. His Majesty has appointed this task to me, in light of recent events."

"I see." She paused before adding, "Before you go, I have a question. Do you believe the United Beast Kingdom is responsible for what happened in Baron Lockit's territory?"

Sieg was troubled by her question. He mulled over his answer for a moment, then carefully prefaced it by insisting that what he was about to say was nothing but his personal opinion at this juncture.

"I do not think the United Beast Kingdom instigated the revolt," he said. "Would they really create unrest in the land ruled by the family of the crown prince's fiancée, while leaving behind weapons manufactured in their homeland, when Haldoria's relationship with the United Beast Kingdom has been solid thus far...? No, I'm not inclined to believe such a carefully crafted narrative."

Adel nodded. "I agree," she said. "There seems to be someone pulling the strings in the shadows, so remain vigilant at all times during your journey."

"Yes, Your Highness." Sieg bowed to her once more.

As she watched him walk away, Adel whispered to herself, "If that someone truly is Elizabeth, then..."

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Luis left his VIP cabin and headed to the deck to take in the sights of the sea. He was currently aboard a magic-powered ship going from the Yutear Empire to the United Beast Kingdom.

"It was in these waters that the Silver Witch fought a kraken, wasn't it?" said a voice from behind him.

Luis turned around and acknowledged her. "Miele."

The woman held down her black hair to keep it from fluttering in the wind and went to stand next to Luis.

"What would you do if a kraken suddenly attacked?" she asked.

Luis laughed. "Such things never happen nowadays," he replied.

The ship they were on was one of the newest magic ships out there. It continuously emitted magic waves whose wavelengths repulsed monsters. Ever since the invention of that system, monster attacks at sea had become incredibly rare.

"Don't stay in the wind for too long," Miele said. "You don't want to catch a cold right before your important business talks, do you?"

"You're right. I'll go back inside."

As the two of them walked back toward their cabins, Miele took out the small notebook she kept in her pocket and began to run through preparations for the meeting.

"The clients have gotten in touch to request an increase in the amount of aqua silk we sell them. How do you want to handle that?"

"We're not doing it. Our aqua silk supplies are too limited."

"Right. We do have some degree of flexibility with our cosmetics, though."

"True, but I doubt they'll request any more of those. We already hold ninety percent of the market share for cosmetics in the United Beast Kingdom. Increasing our sales volume beyond that isn’t realistic,” Luis said with a strained laugh. He took out a bottle of wine. Before he had even opened it, Miele had set two glasses on the table.

— Excerpt of a conversation between Luis Carlton, head of the Carlton Commercial Firm and advisor to the Traitre Commercial Firm, and his private secretary, Miele Katarina.

# Chapter 3: The United Beast Kingdom

At long last, our ship reached the United Beast Kingdom and laid anchor off the coast, a small distance from the harbor. The waters near the coast were too shallow for a ship as large as this one to dock in the harbor. Instead, we used a small boat to disembark, alongside Egret. Once we reached the pier, I caught a whiff of a peculiar aroma in the air. Until now, it had been covered by the strong smell of salt coming from the sea.

Misha took several deep breaths and said, “What a strange smell.”

“That’s the scent of the spices people cultivate around here,” I told her.

“These spices don’t grow in the empire, but the United Beast Kingdom’s climate is the perfect environment for them. Spices are some of the most important agricultural products of the United Beast Kingdom, and they’re exported to many other countries.” Lunoa rattled off the details as if she were reciting from a textbook.

“That’s right,” I confirmed as we left the pier and started walking along one of the large streets of the coastal city. “Spices need warm days and cool nights to grow. In addition, the humidity level must remain high all year round.”

We’d only been walking for a few minutes when Egret pointed at a restaurant.

“This place makes great seafood soup,” he said. “They also have freshly baked bread with seaweed in the dough that goes perfectly with the soup.”

“That sounds delicious. I’ve never heard of using nori in bread dough before. Is it some sort of secret local specialty?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t call it secret, but nori is hard to preserve. It’s rare to see it used in dishes outside of this city.”

“It does sound tasty,” Lunoa agreed.

“Should we skip dinner at the inn and dine there instead?” suggested Misha.

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” Egret said. “Sailors flock to that place to drink at night."

"Really, Mr. Egret?" Misha asked.

"Yep. You'd be much better off going tomorrow after the breakfast rush has passed. If you arrive too early, it's packed with fishermen and sailors."

"In that case, let's have a light breakfast tomorrow morning and swing by that restaurant before we depart," Mireille said.

"That sounds good," I said. "Let the inn staff know so they can prepare breakfast accordingly."

"Of course, miss."

"Are you also spending the night in this city?" I asked Egret. He shook his head, looking downcast.

"I wish I could, but someone from my company should be here to pick me up already. I'm supposed to spend the night at my firm's branch in the next town over. If you'd care to come with me, it'd be my pleasure to take you along, though."

"Thank you for the offer, but we have other plans. After resting here tonight, we'll head directly for the royal capital."

"I see... That's a shame, but I suppose it can't be helped. I do have some business in the capital too, so perhaps I'll be lucky enough to meet you again there." As he spoke, Egret noticed a carriage in the distance. He waved and the person standing next to the carriage, who I assumed was one of his employees, waved back. "Right on time. My people are competent—a little too much so. I was hoping they'd be late for once," he joked.

Egret shrugged and bid us farewell before walking off toward the carriage. After parting with him, we headed to the inn he'd recommended to us. Alice happily watched the sun slowly sink into the sea as I pulled her along. Eventually, we saw a sign that read "Golden Wind Pavilion." It was a two-story-tall brick building with an elegant, sophisticated atmosphere. As we entered, a tall bearkin woman greeted us.

"Welcome!" she said, her voice warm and pleasant.

"Do you have room for six?" I asked.

"Would two double rooms and one single do? And we can add a little bed to one of them for the little miss."

"That'd be perfect. My daughter will stay with me. Lunoa, Misha, the two of you don't mind rooming together, do you?"

"Not at all," said Lunoa.

"We're happy to!" said Misha.

After receiving our keys from the innkeeper, we headed upstairs to put down our luggage. From the window of the room I shared with Alice, I could see the bustling market and the white-crested waves that stretched to the horizon. After I finally sat down, Lunoa and Misha came to our room.

"It still feels like the ground is shaking under my feet," Lunoa said.

"Mine too! With the salt breeze and the sound of the waves, I can't help but feel like we're still on the ship," Misha added.

I let out a little laugh before pointing out the main difference between our time on the ship and now.

"We'll get to enjoy a completely different meal tonight."

"Yes! Finally!" Misha exclaimed.

"Dried vegetables had a nice, strong taste, but nothing beats fresh vegetables," Lunoa agreed.

"Mama, I'm hungry," Alice said.

"It won't be long until it's time to—" Before I could finish my sentence, someone knocked on the door.

"Dinner is ready, dear guests."

"Thank you for letting us know; we're coming."

As soon as we went down to the inn's dining area, the innkeeper brought us trays piled with food.

"Here you go. You must have traveled by sea. I've cooked you fresh vegetables and meat, so eat up!" she said, lining up plates on the large table.

The main dish was a stew made with plenty of vegetables. There was also salad and bread but no fish whatsoever. Fish-based dishes were certainly popular in a coastal city like this one, so I assumed the innkeeper was being considerate of the fact that we'd eaten more than enough fish on the ship. I certainly appreciated having something different.

"This stew tastes different from the one we usually have in the empire," Misha said.

"It might be because of the milk," Lunoa replied.

"It is," I said. "People in the United Beast Kingdom use goat milk. In the empire, we usually use cow milk. That's why it tastes different."

"The climate and environment are different from those of the empire too," Mireille continued. "Even when making the same dishes, people use different ingredients. You'll notice that the wheat used in the bread isn't exactly like the one you're used to. And many of the vegetables in that salad are ones we seldom see in the empire."

Lunoa reached for her bread and took a bite.

"Oh! It's true! It tastes a lot...stronger, or perhaps I should say richer?"

"But it feels a bit dry, doesn't it?" Misha commented.

Lunoa and Misha both seemed very interested in the foreign ingredients, and they eagerly discussed every dish while Alice happily munched on her salad. I could tell she appreciated the harmony of the fruits and vegetables in it.

After we finished eating and returned to our room, Alice fell asleep almost immediately. The boat trip must have tuckered her out. Alice kicked away her blanket in her sleep, and I was fixing it when Mireille came back from dinner.

"I've returned," she said.

"Welcome back, Mireille. How did it go?"

"There doesn't seem to be anyone looking for us. And I can confirm that Mister Egret and his people have indeed left the city."

"All right. That's good. We can rest easy in that case," I replied. "Tomorrow, we'll try the restaurant Egret recommended, then set off around noon."

"Understood."

"Good night, Mireille."

"Good night, miss."

I slipped under the covers next to Alice. The bed was already warm thanks to her, and her sleepiness was contagious, helping me slip into slumber in no time. I wasn't sure why, but as I held my daughter in my arms and started drifting off to sleep, Egret's face popped into my mind for a fleeting moment.

The next morning, we ate a very light breakfast at the inn. Mireille and Barl then left to arrange transportation for us while I took Alice, Lunoa, and Misha on a walk. I'd made sure to keep our schedule as open as possible for this trip because I wanted to have enough time to let the girls explore a foreign country for the first time.

As we walked along the harbor, we saw muscular beastkin men carrying hefty crates onto ships while chatting loudly. We watched the hustle and bustle as they loaded up the vessels.

“What a lively port,” Misha said.

“Well, this port is the gateway to the empire and its sizable market,” I replied.

“Despite all this activity, it doesn’t look like it’s being all that well maintained, though,” Lunoa pointed out.

“Well, that has to do with the beastkin’s way of life,” I said. “The United Beast Kingdom, as I explained before, is a union of several tribes.”

“How does that work?” Lunoa asked.

“The first Beast King brought all of these tribes together under his leadership and founded a nation. Speaking of which, the head of the lionkin tribe is serving the current term. His name is Leon Lionheart.”

“The current term...?”

“The United Beast Kingdom does not have a royal family like most other countries. Instead, the twelve most influential tribes each select a king candidate. The way the king is chosen from among them is also very unique. Once every ten years, the kingdom holds a martial arts tournament for the twelve king candidates to battle each other.”

“Th-They pick their king with a martial arts tournament?!” Misha interjected.

“Indeed,” I replied. “A peculiar tradition, isn’t it? The strangest part is that they do not seem to have had any issues with the process so far. The current king, His Majesty Leon, has won the tournament three times in a row. It’ll soon be thirty years since he first sat on the throne.”

“Considering your explanation, I’m not sure I understand how such a country found itself becoming a vassal to another power. It seems very unlike their temperament,” Lunoa said.

“Actually, that temperament of theirs is the very reason they’ve become Haldoria’s vassal state. When King Leon won his first martial tournament, Bulat Haldoria—who was still crown prince at the time—was there as a guest. He barged into the arena and challenged King Leon to a duel.”

“Huh?!” Misha let out.

“B-But...wouldn’t that turn into a diplomatic catastrophe?!” Lunoa asked.

“Strangely enough, no. Apparently, the crowd cheered when he entered the arena. Afterward, Bulat and King Leon battled for three days and three nights until, ultimately, Bulat prevailed."

"And...nothing happened? Winning against the king in a foreign country could lead to so many issues..." Lunoa said.

I shrugged. "It didn't, and to this day, the people of the United Beast Kingdom love to tell the story."

Suddenly, Alice pulled on my sleeve. "Mama! Look!" She was pointing at the shore. I followed her gaze and saw a group of men in the water dragging a net toward the beach. "What's that?" she continued.

"Those people are beach seining. They join forces together to drag that large net so they can catch fish," I explained.

"Lots of fishies!"

"Yes, lots of them indeed."

As the men advanced, the fish caught inside the net thrashed, splashing water everywhere. Each droplet shone, reflecting the soft morning rays.

When we returned from our stroll, Mireille and Barl were done with their duties, so we headed to the restaurant Egret had pointed out to us. Just as he'd said, the morning rush was over and the establishment was mostly empty, save for a few elderly men and women.

"Welcome! Sit wherever you like!" a hoarse voice called from the back of the restaurant as soon as we entered.

We picked an empty table at random and sat down. A young waitress who seemed to be about fifteen came up to us.

"Welcome, have you decided on your order?"

"A friend recommended your seaweed bread and seafood soup," I said. "Do you serve those at this time?"

"Absolutely. We can have that ready for you in no time."

"Then we'll have that. And water, please."

"Of course! I'll be right back."

We only waited a few moments before the waitress came back, carrying a huge tray with both hands. She placed loaves of bread that smelled like the sea in front of us. They were still warm, so I assumed they were fresh out of the oven. The soup was so clear that I could see the bits of fish, shellfish, and herbs in the broth.

"It's so good!" Lunoa said approvingly after taking a mouthful.

"Even better than I expected," I agreed.

“The bread has such a curious scent,” Misha said.

“It’s yummy!” Alice sang.

“Should we buy some more bread so we can have it on the road?” Mireille asked.

“Hey, waitress! Bring me seconds!” Barl shouted at the young girl.

“Coming right up!”

Our group was being a little loud, but I supposed it was fine considering the atmosphere of this place and its normal clientele. After we finished our meal, we bought a few extra loaves of bread before heading to our transportation. The carriage Mireille and Barl had prepared was waiting for us right outside the city. I paid the rabbitkin driver the fee, as well as a large tip, and we boarded the carriage. For the sake of safety, Barl sat next to the driver.

We set off. It would take roughly two hours for us to reach the capital.

“What nice, serene scenery,” Misha commented.

“I would have expected things to be less quiet,” Lunoa said. “Do brigands not attack carriages transporting goods from the harbor to the capital?”

“Topographically, the United Beast Kingdom is mostly vast plains with occasional forests,” I said. “This means the visibility on the road is quite good. On top of that, adventurers and soldiers often patrol the area surrounding the royal capital to get rid of monsters. For that reason, brigands are seldom seen in this region.”

“The road will be safe, then,” Misha said.

“There seem to be many fields and livestock pastures along the main road,” Lunoa said. “The farmers and herders must also profit from the level of safety as they travel from their farms to their towns and villages.”

“Indeed. I doubt brigands would dare lay a hand on them in the first place, though. The people of the United Beast Kingdom value strength, so many of them train. Those who leave their villages or towns to work outside are, for the most part, confident in their physical abilities and fighting skills.”

The girls gazed in excitement at the people working along the road. As the carriage advanced, rocking rhythmically, I taught them about the plants the farmers were cultivating, the cultural differences between the empire and the Beast Kingdom, and the customs of this country.

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"Damn it!" Friede punched his desk. Ever since Adel had taken over his duties, he had practically been on house arrest. He'd sent assassins to kill Adel through some of his connections, but she'd turned the tables on him by arresting them herself!

"Now I need to send even more assassins to kill the others!" he groaned, bringing his hand to his mouth and gnawing on his nails unconsciously. "Damn that bitch!" Overcome with anger, he swiped his hand across his desk, flinging everything to the ground. The sound of shattering glass rent the air as his wine glass smashed on the floor. "Damn them all!"

Friede paced back and forth, unable to calm down, muttering profanity after profanity. Adel had placed some of her people right outside of his chambers, so he couldn't sneak away. His sister had said she was gathering evidence that Sylvia had framed Elizabeth. Denouncing Sylvia had to be part of her ploy to steal his title and become crown princess. Friede was certain of it.

"U-Um, Your Highness..."

"What?!" he roared.

Sylvia, who'd timidly tried to grab his attention, gasped in surprise at his reaction. Friede turned to look at her and took a deep breath after finding her frozen in fear.

"Sorry, Sylvie. It must be hard for you. You just lost your family."

"I-It is, but I'm fine, Your Highness," she replied. "Because I have you by my side."

"Sylvie," Friede said, moved. He took a step toward her, extending his arm to put a hand on her shoulder. Right before he could, her shoulder slumped down pathetically. Her sense of timing was as practiced as that of a stage actress, but Friede did not notice anything strange about the motion. He couldn't help but worry, seeing her in such low spirits.

"What's wrong, my lovely Sylvie? If anything is worrying you, you can talk to me."

"My prince... I... I don't understand why Her Highness Adel hates me so much..." she said. She'd been looking down, but she lifted her head to gaze up at Friede, unshed tears welling up in her eyes. She slowly got closer to him, her voice becoming quieter and weaker. "I truly wanted to get along with her, but..."

"Sylvie! How sweet and kind you are... But you don't need to care about that foreign, good-for-nothing sister of mine. My father wanted to make a point, but we all know I'll be the next king. At the end of the day, Adel is only a woman. Besides, her magic attribute is wind. As the king's eldest son and successor of the royal thunder, *I* will sit on the throne."

"Of course, my prince. But Her Highness Adel still holds great power in court at the moment. Wouldn't it be wiser to strive to improve your relationship with her?"

Friede's brow involuntarily furrowed at the suggestion, but he quickly coaxed his expression into a bright smile.

"You're right. Besides, having my younger sister murdered so I can take the throne isn't very respectable, now, is it?"

"Indeed, my prince. Let's discuss how to talk to Her Highness together!"

◆

Deep inside a dark cave, a man with long, pointed ears and upward-angled eyes stood next to a pile of monster corpses. The man, who outwardly appeared to be Lotton Flywok, one of the members of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council, secretly bore another name, Phasmid, which had been given to him by his master. He was inside a dungeon in the vicinity of the royal capital of the United Beast Kingdom, on his master's orders. In front of him lay a large crystal about as tall as an adult man.

"So this is the dungeon core. It's my first time seeing one," he said. "What incredible mana."

He reached out to touch the core, but the space in front of him warped before he could lay a finger on it, manifesting a monster that blocked his path.

"It truly can bring forth monsters out of thin air... How does that work?" Phasmid wondered. He calmly observed the lion monster that lunged at him.

"Spirit Invocation."

Three child-shaped spirits appeared. While they were small, they each contained a considerable store of mana. The first one carried a large shield, the second a longsword, and the third a magical staff. The spirit with the shield stopped the monster in its tracks, bracing against its advance while the swordsman and the magician eliminated it with a combination of swift slashes and fire magic.

“Flywok’s body truly is outstanding,” Phasmid said. “The only drawback is that I often find myself speaking as stiffly as he did.”

Phasmid grinned and snapped his fingers. Obeying his command, the three spirits attacked the dungeon core in unison. The moment they destroyed it, the atmosphere inside the dungeon shifted drastically. Despite all of the monsters roaming inside them, dungeons were orderly—that natural order had now been thoroughly thrown into chaos.

“This state will not hold for more than a few days. Then, it shall be time for the stampede. I had to annihilate quite a few monsters to get here, but that won’t change a thing.”

Mana seeped out of the broken core, creating a growing horde of monsters. By the time this process was over, the number of monsters Phasmid had killed wouldn’t even be a drop in the bucket.

“This marks the end of my mission,” Phasmid said. “I shall head back to the royal capital. Who knows? I may yet run into *her*.”

Phasmid’s gaze left the broken dungeon core. He’d lost interest already. He turned on his heel and walked toward the exit.

◇

Nothing of note happened on the way to the capital, and after a few hours in the carriage, we reached our destination safely. After we left the carriage and swiftly filled out the necessary paperwork, we were allowed through the sturdy walls that protected the royal capital of the United Beast Kingdom. As soon as we were through the gate, my eyes were drawn to the colossal yet unrefined palace that dominated the center of the city. Next to it was another building just as large.

Alice pointed at it and asked, “Mama, what’s that?”

There was no such building next to the imperial palace, so it was no wonder that Alice was unfamiliar with it. It was a gigantic amphitheater. The building was circular, with a stage at its center and seating for the audience all around it. Its stone walls and pillars bore carvings depicting the likenesses of mighty gladiators and ferocious monsters. All in all, the building was very extravagant, unlike the unadorned, simple royal palace.

“That’s the arena,” I told Alice. “Every ten years, it hosts the martial arts tournament that decides the king of this country. The rest of the time, gladiators and adventurers perform in front of the crowd, fighting each other or slaying monsters."

I'd once been invited to such a show. It was a form of entertainment that certainly fit the beastkin's temperament.

"I remember hearing about the amphitheater from my dad," Misha said, her ears drooping. "He said that oftentimes, slaves of the Beast Kingdom were forced to become gladiators and fight to the death..."

Barl patted her head. "They don't do that anymore. Things used to be like that decades ago, but the current king refuses to force any unwilling participants to fight in the arena. The current gladiators all made that choice for themselves."

"Really?" Misha asked.

"Yeah. Plenty of slaves still do it because they can be freed if they get enough wins in the arena. But many of the ones who make it continue to be gladiators even as free men."

Misha's eyes widened in surprise at Barl's explanation.

I scooped up Alice into my arms. There was a lot of traffic on this street, and I didn't want to expose her to danger. Our group ambled toward the center of the city, getting sidetracked often to look at stalls selling unusual fruits and curious magic items. Eventually, we reached a luxurious hotel called Shining Mane, a three-story-tall stone structure. Since most of the guests were foreign merchants, the hotel had a large adjoining stable and space to park carriages. There were also meeting rooms one could rent out for business talks, each of which had an antechamber for servants.

"I will go take care of the formalities," Mireille declared. "Follow me, Misha."

"Yes, Miss Mireille," Misha replied.

"Thank you," I said.

We waited in the lobby while Mireille and Misha went to the reception. There was a grand fountain in the center of the lobby that had caught Alice's and Lunoa's attention, so I sat on a bench watching over them as they got a close-up look. Barl stood a few paces away from them, near enough to step in and protect them at a moment's notice.

"My, Miss Leis? Is that you?"

I heard someone call out my name and turned to see an elven man waving at me, smiling.

"It is you. It has been quite some time, Miss Leis."

"Indeed it has, Mr. Flywok," I replied. This man was Lotton Flywok, the Clairvoyant, one of the members of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council.

"Who would have thought I'd run into you in such a place," he said. "Have you changed your hair color? Ah, sorry, please forget I asked. I understand your motivation. We are in the United Beast Kingdom, after all."

"Thank you for your thoughtful words," I said. "Come to think of it, this hotel is one of the establishments you manage, is it not?"

"It is. Several years have gone by since the empire signed the armistice with Haldoria. I've increased my business in its vassal countries ever since. In fact, I came here to personally inspect one of my branch offices in the area. I was just about to return to the empire."

"I see."

"Speaking of Haldoria's vassals, have you heard the latest news from the Nile Kingdom?"

"What news?" I asked with interest. The Nile Kingdom wasn't just one of Haldoria's vassal states—it was also Egret's homeland.

"A few days ago, a coup d'état transpired there," Lotton revealed. "The second prince rebelled and slew the king and the crown prince to seize the throne. Yet in a shocking twist of fate, the third prince executed him soon after."

The third prince of the Nile Kingdom... I knew of his existence, but that was about it. I'd heard he seldom showed himself in high society to avoid creating political disturbances.

"The third prince had renounced his right to the throne long ago," Lotton continued, "but with the second prince's treason and the events that followed, there were no other candidates for the throne left. Word has it that he was crowned in a hurry."

"My, what a mess," I said. So, there was strife in the Nile Kingdom's government. I had thought that the political situation was rather stable there, so this surprised me. Was it due to the recent deterioration of the relationships between the Kingdom of Haldoria and its vassals?

"For that reason, I suggest you avoid business with this country and its neighbors until the dust settles," Lotton added. "The United Beast Kingdom has not been impacted, but some of the chaos has spread to the Nile Kingdom's direct neighbors."

"That's valuable information. Thank you," I said.

"Oh, don't mention it," Lotton said. "Well, then, I believe it is time for me to take my leave. I hope your business here goes well, Miss Leis." With these words, Lotton left the hotel.

"I'm sorry for the wait, Miss Ellie," said Mireille as she returned.

"Don't worry about it, Mireille," I replied. "Thank you."

"Wasn't that man from the empire's Merchants' Guild Council?"

"Yes, that was Lotton Flywok. He told me some intriguing news. There was a coup d'état in the Nile Kingdom."

"Is that true?!" Mireille asked, her surprise evident in the volume of her voice.

"I don't believe the Clairvoyant would lie about something like that, but it wouldn't hurt to verify it. I'll summon a few saint birds tonight; you gather information on your side too."

"Understood, miss."

◆

A new desk stood in Adel's office in the royal palace of Haldoria. Just like Adel's and Roselia's desks, it was almost entirely covered by towering heaps of documents. Behind it sat Eiwass. He was organizing papers, his trademark nonchalant smile gracing his visage, when a maid carrying a tea tray walked past his desk.

"You," he called out to her.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Could you please bring these to the minister of finance's aide?" he asked.

"Of course, my lord." The maid accepted the documents and was about to leave the room when Eiwass stopped her.

"Oh, and...would you care for a meal with me sometime? I know a teahouse that serves delectable cake near the palace. I'd be honored if a beauty such as yo—"

"Eiwass," Adel barked, cutting him off. "Keep your hands off my maids."

Flushing, the maid hurried out of the room.

"You're no fun," Eiwass said, pouting.

Adel ignored him and turned to look at Roselia. "Roselia, is everything ready?" she asked.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I'm sorry for making you work so much. I know that deep down, all you want is to run back to your dear fiancé."

"W-Well... I..." Roselia hesitated before admitting, "Yes, indeed."

"Once this is over and done with, I'll grant you a long vacation, so please bear with me a little longer. I promise your house and your fiancé's will be duly compensated for your hard work."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

So far, Eiwass had listened to their conversation without a word. Now he spoke up, frowning in dissatisfaction.

"Your Highness, aren't *I* the main person in charge of this particular job?"

"You are," Adel replied. "And Roselia is in charge of *you*."

Adel took out two letters and slid one onto Eiwass's desk and one onto Roselia's.

"They're invitations to the empire's celebratory festival," she said. "The two of you will head to the empire to attend the celebrations in lieu of the crown prince. I would have preferred to go myself, but I can't leave the palace right now. You'll depart in three days and will stop at several villages and cities along the way. I'm counting on you."

"Understood!" Roselia exclaimed.

"Sure, leave it to us," Eiwass said.

As Adel observed their reactions, it reminded her of just how different these two were. Roselia was clearly tense at the idea of representing her country abroad, but Eiwass remained as relaxed as always.

◇

The day of our business negotiations had come. We set out to meet a representative of one of the most prominent companies in the Beast Kingdom's royal capital, the Sulusula Commercial Firm. As soon as we arrived, a worker showed us to a drawing room.

"I've been awaiting you," said the head of the firm, a tall, burly bullkin man with two prominent horns. "I'm glad to have you here. My name is Drucken Sulusula, and I serve as the chairman of the Sulusula Commercial Firm. It's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine," I replied. "I'm Ellie Leis, head of the Traitre Commercial Firm."

Despite his muscular, imposing body, Drucken was surprisingly polite. He courteously pointed to the sofa and invited us to sit down. After thanking him, Lunoa and I seated ourselves, while Mireille and Misha stood behind us. I'd left Alice at the hotel, in Barl's care.

"I understand you're here to discuss cosmetics you'd like to export to the United Beast Kingdom. Is that correct?" Drucken asked.

"Indeed," I replied. As I spoke, an apologetic look flashed on Drucken's face.

"Well… I'm terribly sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I must warn you—I do not believe cosmetics would sell very well here."

"I'm aware of the beastkin's usual issues with cosmetic products. However, the line I've brought to you today is different. It's been specially developed to avoid overstimulating beastkin's keen senses. Would you be so kind as to try one of my products for yourself?" I asked, taking out several small pots and placing them on the table. "These were all made to suit the specific needs of beastkin."

"Well, then, if you'll allow me," Drucken said, carefully picking up one of the pots between two massive fingers. He opened the pot and tilted it until a drop of liquid fell onto the back of his hand. After he brought his hand to his face and smelled it, he stared at the pot, wide-eyed. Drucken turned to face the door to the next room and called out, "Mary, are you here?"

After a few seconds, a woman pushed the door open and entered before bowing in respect.

"This is Mary, my secretary," Drucken said. "I'd like to hear her opinion on your products, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," I said.

After reviewing every pot with Mary, Drucken decided to purchase my products. I also managed to secure a second deal for my aqua silk.

Once we had concluded our negotiations, we left the Sulusula Commercial Firm building. Right outside the door was a luxurious carriage. I froze as soon as I saw it. I hurriedly glanced at Mireille, and she swept her hood over her head in a slow, natural motion.

The coachman opened the door of the carriage and a man stepped out. His appearance and demeanor made it clear that he was a very high-ranking noble. He began walking toward the door —toward us—as his monocle reflected the light of the magic lamps that illuminated the entrance. Mireille and I moved aside and bowed politely. That was the normal thing to do for any merchant who ran into a nobleman.

I kept my head low, doing everything I could to conceal my emotions, and waited for him to pass us by. However, the noble stopped in his tracks.

"Oh?" he said. His response to us was *not* normal. A noble would usually nod or wave and continue on without paying much attention to the merchants.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm," I replied, still looking down. "I came here to sign a contract with the Sulusula Commercial Firm."

"I see. Well, raise your head," he said.

I had no choice but to heed his command. When he saw my face, his brow furrowed.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

"I don't believe we have, my lord. Our firm usually does business in the empire, so I've had very few opportunities to meet aristocrats from the kingdom."

For a moment, the man's expression took on a tinge of suspicion at the fact that I knew he was from the kingdom. However, he quickly relaxed once he noticed that my gaze was on the crest embroidered on his coat.

"I see..." he said. "Something about you reminds me of someone I know."

I let out a little laugh. "That's a very cliché pickup line, my lord."

"I apologize if you misunderstood me, but being flirtatious was never my intention. The person you resemble is my daughter," he said.

"My, is that so? I suppose I got ahead of myself," I replied with a smile.

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly as he said, "I shall take my leave. Goodbye."

I bowed respectfully as he entered the building. As soon as the door closed, I felt a surge of mana by my side. Lunoa's face blanched as white as a sheet as she sensed Mireille's murderous mana, and Misha's ears and tail drooped weakly.

"Mireille, stop that. He'll notice."

"I'm so sorry!" She didn't seem to have realized her slipup, and she immediately contained her mana.

"Um... Wh-Who's that nobleman?" Lunoa asked nervously.

Neither Mireille nor I responded. We boarded our carriage and waited for it to depart. I used magic to make the box soundproof before finally answering her question.

"That man is the prime minister of the Kingdom of Haldoria...and my father, Sieg Leiston."

"Huh?!" Lunoa said with a gasp.

"B-But he saw your face earlier, didn't he?!" Misha's tone was full of worry.

"He didn't recognize her," Mireille said, anger coating every word that rolled off her tongue. "That man didn't recognize his own daughter because she dyed her hair. I had no expectations of him to begin with, but this is a new low."

I had known that Sieg was in the United Beast Kingdom, but I had never imagined I would run into him like that.

◆

After arriving in the United Beast Kingdom, Sieg decided to visit the head of the Sulusula Commercial Firm, with whom he'd always had a good relationship. His main goal was to obtain information on the current state of affairs in the United Beast Kingdom before his audience with the Beast King the next day.

His carriage stopped in front of the firm's building, and the coachman opened the door for him to disembark. The sun had almost set, and the magic lamps installed in front of the company building were on. After checking that his servant had picked up his belongings, Sieg walked toward the entrance.

"Oh?" he said. As he approached, he noticed a merchant accompanied by three other women—a young girl who appeared to be an apprentice plus two servants. They all bowed in deference to him. If the merchant had brought her apprentice and servants with her, Sieg assumed that she managed a large firm.

At first, Sieg didn't think much of the group. He was about to wave his hand in acknowledgment and walk past them when he suddenly found himself stopping, without really knowing why. For some reason, the black-haired merchant had caught his attention. He had the distinct impression that he'd seen her before, but he couldn't recall where.

"Who are you?" he couldn't stop himself from asking.

"I'm the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm," the woman replied. "I came here to sign a contract with the Sulusula Commercial Firm."

The merchant was still bowing, but Sieg felt like he recognized what little he could see of her face. To make sure of it, he asked her to raise her head. Seeing her features, framed by her thick, raven locks, confused him even more.

"Have we met before?"

At his words, the woman smiled elegantly. From her demeanor, it was obvious to Sieg that she'd received a good education. She conducted herself like a high-ranking noble.

"I don't believe we have, my lord. Our firm usually does business in the empire, so I've had very few opportunities to meet aristocrats from the kingdom."

Sieg hadn't introduced himself, yet she knew he was from the kingdom. For a moment, he found that strange, but it made sense when he noticed that her eyes were on the crest of House Leiston that decorated his coat. Still, even though House Leiston was an important ducal house, it was impressive that a young woman from the empire recognized the crest of a family from the kingdom, considering the rarity of exchanges between the two nations. She had to be quite the competent merchant. Eventually, Sieg concluded that with her education and knowledge, she was most likely the daughter of some important merchant from the empire. In that case, it was likely he'd met her at a party before, hence why she looked familiar.

"I see... Something about you reminds me of someone I know."

"That's a very cliché pickup line, my lord," she replied with a smile so enigmatic that Sieg couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Still, he realized that he had chosen his words poorly and quickly said, "I apologize if you misunderstood me, but being flirtatious was never my intention. The person you resemble is my daughter.”

“My, is that so? I suppose I got ahead of myself.”

“I shall take my leave. Goodbye.”

With these words, Sieg entered the building, leaving the merchant behind.

◇

Once we got back to the hotel after that most unpleasant encounter, I told Alice to go play with Lunoa and Misha. Then, I brought Barl and Mireille to another room so we could talk.

“I’ll be blunt: I was completely blindsided,” I said.

“I never thought we’d run into Sieg Leiston either,” Mireille said.

“Isn’t this a great opportunity? Here’s your chance to kill him,” Barl suggested.

“That would prove difficult,” I said. “He has undoubtedly brought talented guards along, and he is quite the decent fighter himself. If we try to kill him outside of a battlefield, we’ll inevitably attract attention. My initial goal was to stop him from salvaging the relationship between Haldoria and the Beast Kingdom, but now that I’ve run into him and been forced to disclose Traitre’s name, I’ll need to be careful. One wrong move and he might find me out.”

“This will restrict the scope of our actions in this country,” Mireille said.

“It will, but there’s nothing we can do about it now,” I replied. “As of now, the plan has changed. For the time being, we’ll observe Sieg from afar and gather intelligence. We’ll conduct Traitre’s business quietly while we wait for a favorable moment.”

Now that we were all on the same page, we went to look for Alice and the others before heading to a nearby restaurant for dinner.

◇

The rays of the sun poured in through the large windows, lighting up the table where two people sat facing one another. One of them was a man with a calm, somewhat cold disposition, and the other was a young girl with a similar temperament.

“There. Your knight is doomed now, father,” the girl said.

"That was a good move," the man said, moving his own piece over the board without pausing to think. "But what will you do if I put my dragon knight here?"

"Urgh..." the young girl groaned, frustrated. This one move had instantly reversed the state of the game to her father's advantage.

It was rare for her father to have any time to dedicate to her, so she'd made use of a short break from her demanding lessons to challenge him to a game. At first, she'd dominated the board, but her father had always evaded her attacks at the last minute, only to finally hit her with the move that had turned the tide entirely.

The man leisurely sipped his tea, glancing at the small hourglass that showed how much time his daughter had left. The girl suddenly seemed struck by inspiration. She picked up a piece in her small hand and moved it across the board.

"How about this?" she asked proudly. "Your dragon knight cannot do anything against my wizard!"

The man's move had been perfect. He had anticipated every move until the end and was certain his victory was assured. However, his daughter's move had shattered that vision. This was a novel tactic he had never seen tried before. The man scrutinized the board intently, trying to think of a way to come back from his new position, but the placement of the wizard had thoroughly crushed him.

"I concede," he said. "There's no way I can win."

The girl seemed overjoyed.

"Here. This is your reward for having won against me," the man said, taking out a small parcel from his pocket and handing it to her.

"May I truly have it?!" The young girl excitedly opened the package to find a simple hair tie.

"This is a magic item I received from His Majesty," the man said. "It can only be used once, but it will store mana until it's used. It's yours now."

"Thank you very much, father."

The man lightly patted his daughter's head.

"You've become strong, Elizabeth."

◇

I sat up quietly and looked around. I was in my hotel room in the royal capital of the United Beast Kingdom. Outside, the sky was dark, and Mireille was still asleep on the bed beside mine.

"What a foolish dream," I whispered to myself.

I picked up the pitcher on my bedside table and poured myself a glass of water before downing it in one gulp. As I reached out to put the glass back down, I noticed the hair tie I'd removed the previous night when I undid my braid before bed. This hair accessory was one of my trump cards. It had been accumulating mana for years.

"I suppose I had that unpleasant dream because I saw *him* while wearing that."

It was a dream of my childhood—the first and last time my father had ever patted my head. I put my head back against my pillow, closed my eyes, and wished that I would forget the vision by the morning.

After we awoke, we were heading down to the restaurant for breakfast when I saw a familiar face by the hotel's entrance.

"Hey. It's been a few days."

"Good morning, Egret. I'm glad to see you've arrived in the capital."

"I just got here now, actually. I had to make quite the detour, so it took me way longer than expected, and— URGH?!"

While Egret was in the middle of speaking, the young girl standing next to him punched him in the stomach, and he doubled over in pain. Like Egret, the girl had dark skin, and she seemed to be about the same age as Misha and Lunoa.

"President! How many times must I remind you to be more courteous when speaking with others in public?!"

"But you punching your boss in public is okay, huh?" Egret shot back.

The young girl straightened her posture before bowing to me, exhibiting the perfect model of respect.

"Our president caused you much trouble during your naval journey. Please allow me to apologize on his behalf as one of the Birch Commercial Firm's employees. My name is Oulu Aiz."

"I'm Ellie Leis," I introduced myself. "But please don't worry. Egret has been a great help by giving me valuable information, as well as letters of introduction."

"That puts my mind at ease. The president has a tendency to wander off alone and get into trouble, so I often find myself worrying."

"Haven't I always brought back results?" Egret asked. "This time, too, my little expedition to the empire led to meeting Ellie and a chance at securing a supply of aqua silk. What more do you want?"

"Aqua silk is an attractive product indeed. I have no doubt that the demand will be high in our nation," Oulu replied. "Securing a contract before anyone else is a commendable achievement."

"Right?" Egret exclaimed, preening at the praise.

"*However*, companies, as you may know, are ruled by something called a *business plan*," Oulu continued, dragging out the last two words with sarcastic exaggeration. "You cannot just deviate from it and do whatever you want without giving us any warning! Still, the aqua silk is worth it, so I'll let it slide this time."

"Don't punch me if you're letting it slide!"

Egret and Oulu continued to argue back and forth as they walked over to the reception to check in.

After breakfast, Egret and I signed an official contract. Then, I visited several more firms to discuss my new cosmetic lines. In the evening, Egret and Oulu joined us once more so we could have dinner together. Tonight, we were trying traditional Beast Kingdom cuisine.

"That's...um...hearty," Lunoa said.

"That it is," Misha agreed. "There's grilled pork, grilled chicken, *and* grilled fish."

"It's not bad, though," Mireille said.

"Yes, the taste isn't disagreeable. The spices add a nice touch," I said.

"Well, I think it's pretty good," Barl said.

At our comments, an awkward smile appeared on Egret's face. "Chopping ingredients into chunks and grilling them is the basis of Beast Kingdom cuisine," he said.

"I think their salads are great," Lunoa said. "They're so colorful."

We kept chatting as we ate. When we finished the food, the waiter brought us tea. The cups were much smaller than those in the empire—roughly one-third of their size.

"What tiny cups!" Lunoa said.

"This is one of the particularities of this country's tea utensils," Mireille said, pouring us tea from the pot the waiter had brought.

"Is this milk tea?" Misha asked.

"A type of milk tea. This is called chai, and it's the most common variety of tea served here. It's made by adding goat milk and sugar while the tea leaves are steeping. It's quite sweet, so people tend to have it as a dessert rather than to rehydrate throughout the day," Mireille explained, unusually talkative.

I held the warm cup and tried the chai.

I was awakened by rays of light caressing my face through the hotel's windows. Alice was grabbing my clothes, hugging me in her sleep, and I gently nudged her hand away so I could get up. I combed my hair and styled it into a single braid, as I always did these days. Mireille, being an early riser, was already out, and the room was perfectly silent save for Alice's steady breathing.

I had almost finished getting ready when Alice sat up. She was still half asleep, and I watched as her gaze wandered about, unable to focus on anything.

"Mama?"

"Good morning, Alice," I said.

"Mor...ning..." she mumbled.

I picked her up and sat her on my knees so I could brush her hair. By the time I got her bed head under control and tied her usual ribbons into her hair, Alice was fully awake. The two of us went down to the hotel's restaurant, where we saw Mireille and the others having breakfast with Oulu. As soon as she caught sight of the sandwiches and yogurt arranged neatly on the table, Alice dashed forward.

"Oh, that looks delicious," said a voice from behind me.

"President!"

Egret had arrived, only a few moments after Alice and I had entered the restaurant. Oulu took one look at him and immediately jumped up from her chair.

"How could you come down like this? Please, at least do something about your hair!" she exclaimed, rushing over to him.

"It's no big deal."

"Yes, it is! We're going back to your room right this instant."

As Oulu started dragging him away, Egret sighed and said, "All right, all right. I get it." The two came back a few minutes later, with Egret looking presentable. They sat with us and had just started eating when the booming toll of a bell rang out.

Egret was about to bite into a sandwich, but he paused with it halfway to his mouth and asked, “What was that noise?”

Barl was the one to answer his question. “That’s the Adventurers’ Guild’s emergency bell.”

“This is my first time hearing it,” I said.

“You’re a big city girl through and through, missy, that’s why,” Barl said. “This type of bell doesn’t ring unless a city’s on the brink of destruction. That doesn’t usually happen in capitals and the like.”

“B-But... W-We *are* in a capital, aren’t we?” Lunoa asked, anxiety creeping into her voice.

“We are,” I said. “I can only wonder what sort of peril could threaten a city like this one... Mireille, Barl.”

“At once, miss.”

“On it.”

Without me needing to explain anything further, Mireille and Barl disappeared to investigate.

“Lunoa, Misha, get everything ready so we can leave at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, Miss Ellie!” the two answered in unison.

“And Alice, you must promise to remain by my side, all right? Don’t go wandering off, no matter what happens.”

“O-Okay, mama...”

She seemed scared, so I picked her up and held her in my arms.

“Let’s get ready too, Oulu,” Egret said.

“I will go pack our belongings,” Oulu replied. “Please wait for me here, president.”

Not long after Oulu, Misha, and Lunoa had left, Mireille and Barl returned.

“This is bad, missy! A stampede’s coming!”

◇◆☆◆◇

The Rank A adventurer Luisha had come to this city as a bodyguard for one of her merchant friends. This was her first time setting foot in the royal capital of the United Beast Kingdom, a country that had a friendly relationship with her homeland, the Dukedom of Haldoria.

"Thanks, Luisha! I'm counting on you for the return trip too!"

"Sure thing, Mr. Claude. In five days, right?"

"You got that right, but I keep telling you to call me Clarisse! Try to remember, okay?" the tall, muscular merchant warned, bringing their face close to Luisha's and looking her in the eye.

"S-Sorry, Miss Clarisse!"

Clarisse let out a little laugh. "You know, Luisha, they sell tons of clothes and cosmetics for beastkin people here. Try to do some shopping while you're here. You should dress up once in a while!"

They winked at Luisha before turning around, their frilly dress fluttering in the wind. Then, Clarisse skipped away happily, heading toward the long-established Sulusula Commercial Firm to engage in some business talks.

"Phew," Luisha said, with a long exhale. "Clarisse is a great person, but they always come off a bit too strong."

Luisha twitched her ears, sensing the presence of the people around her. She started walking toward the area with the most people, assuming she would find a marketplace and food stalls in that direction. As Clarisse had pointed out, there were also plenty of shops selling clothes and cosmetics, but Luisha cared more about filling up her stomach.

— A scene from the travels of Luisha Tails, the Rank A adventurer.

# Chapter 4: Farewell, Father

Mireille and Barl started telling us what they'd heard at the Adventurers' Guild.

"The core of a dungeon near the city was destroyed. Monsters will start pouring out in a matter of days," Mireille said.

"Seriously? There've been a lot of similar incidents these days..." Egret said, frowning.

"I don't think there has been a similar surge in the empire," I said, "but I have indeed heard of a rise in monster raids and dungeon cores being destroyed in the kingdom's sphere of influence recently."

"King Bulat of Haldoria vowed to investigate the issue himself, but he's yet to report any findings," Egret replied.

"What do we do, missy?" Barl asked. "Apparently, King Leon is assembling an army of adventurers and volunteers to fight the monsters."

"Shouldn't we simply evacuate?" Mireille asked. "Getting involved in a conflict to protect our production base made sense, but we have no reason to put ourselves in danger to protect a foreign country."

"That's true, but..." I got closer to Mireille and whispered quietly in her ear, "Considering the timing, it is highly probable that Sieg Leiston will take command of part of the troops and stand on the front line."

Mireille gasped.

I had only intended to observe from afar and see how the relationship between Haldoria and the United Beast Kingdom would develop, but Sieg stepping onto the battlefield changed everything. No matter how many skilled guards he'd brought with him, there would be openings. And if there were none, I could take advantage of the chaos to create one.

"What's wrong?" Egret asked, looking at us in confusion.

I gazed back into his red eyes. We'd only known each other for a few days, but I could already tell that Egret was a good person.

However, that didn't mean I trusted him yet.

"I'm sorry to ask you this, Egret, but could you leave the room for a moment?" I couldn't tell him about my situation. He was a merchant on Haldoria's side. I had no way of knowing for sure he wouldn't sell me off to Haldoria if the need arose.

"I understand," Egret said after a short pause. "I'll go check on the horses."

I waited until I couldn't see him anymore before sending Alice back to our room so she could stay with Lunoa and Misha for the time being. Then, I used magic to soundproof the room.

"What do the two of you think?" I finally asked.

"It's a golden opportunity," Barl said. "That bastard is the prime minister of an important nation, not someone who often finds himself on the battlefield. Without an all-out war, you won't get another chance like this."

"Remaining in the capital is dangerous," Mireille countered. "The three of us can manage, but if the girls get mixed up in a stampede, they'll die."

"But think of it, missy. If you can finish him off here, it'll definitely work in your favor for the future. He's so hard-hearted that his political choices sometimes leave much to be desired, but he's a genius when it comes to commanding troops. With Bulat's strength and his wits, Haldoria will be incredibly tough to defeat on the field."

Barl was correct. I couldn't let the prospect of killing Sieg pass me by. I thought about the situation for a moment and made my decision.

"Mireille, take the girls and go back to the harbor city. Barl and I will join the Beast King's volunteer army."

"Miss Ellie..." Mireille said weakly.

"Are we all in agreement?" I asked.

"Yes, miss," she confirmed.

"Yep, all good," said Barl.

I dispelled my magic and sent Mireille to take care of Alice and the others. Barl and I started to head to the city square so we could sign up for the volunteer army. Right outside the hotel, we ran into Egret, who was leaning against a wall.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Barl and I will join the Beast King's volunteer army and protect the royal capital," I stated.

"What about the kids?"

"I asked Mireille to take them away."

Egret folded his arms. "Why would you go so far to protect a foreign country?"

Egret's usual flirtatious gaze had disappeared, giving way to a serious, earnest expression. I could tell he was trying to look deep into me and discern my true intentions, but I couldn't give them away.

"I've spent a lot of money and effort trying to secure business deals in this city," I said. I knew my half-baked excuse wouldn't convince him, but if he decided to sever our ties because of it, I could only accept it as what was meant to be.

"I see. Then I'm signing up too," Egret declared.

"What?!" I exclaimed, the shock at his sudden statement snapping my eyes wide open. There was no way he had believed me. Even without me or Barl, the Beast Kingdom would be fine with all of its strong fighters. "What are you even saying?" I continued.

"I thought I was being clear enough. I'm joining the battle."

"Are you stupid?"

"Don't they say stupid men are more popular with the ladies?"

"I've never heard anyone say that. Who's the idiot who came up with that?"

"Me," Egret replied, with a grin. "If you don't mind, I'd like to have Oulu flee with Mireille and the kids."

"Yes, of course... But I'm warning you, I won't save you even if you're in danger!"

"That's fine by me. I'll save you if you're in danger, though." Egret smiled as though he were having a great time, then walked off. Barl and I followed behind him.

◆

"Your Majesty! The First and Second Warrior Divisions have been dispatched!"

"And the Mounted Division is ready to strike at any time!"

"Good! Now summon every division leader!"

"Understood!"

An atmosphere of agitation hung over the royal palace of the United Beast Kingdom. Beastkin did not attach much importance to manners in general, but the urgency of the situation had pushed them to drop even the smallest traces of etiquette. People ran about wildly and screamed at each other despite being in the presence of their sovereign. In fact, the noisiest person in the entire palace may well have been the Beast King himself.

Leon could have left this sort of work to his subordinates, but he had decided to personally make a run to the armory. On his way, a voice stopped him.

“Your Majesty King Leon,” Sieg called out calmly. “My men are done preparing for battle. We shall head out shortly.”

“Sorry to trouble you, Sieg,” Leon replied.

“You are my king’s sworn friend. It’s only natural I would do everything in my power to help your people in such a dire situation.”

With these words, Sieg left the palace alongside the guards he’d brought and the reserve soldiers of the United Beast Kingdom. He led the men to a forest roughly halfway between the dungeon and the royal capital.

Sieg’s force was a little too small to be called an army. However, its main purpose was not to engage the enemy directly but to protect Sieg while he remained on the front lines so he could observe the battlefield and relay effective orders to the other troops. The battle had yet to start, but his men were already hard at work. On his orders, they scouted the area and established defensive positions.

“Duke Leiston! The United Beast Kingdom’s army, the adventurers, and the volunteers have all been deployed!”

“Make sure we have an effective line of communication with each of their commanders. It is imperative that we be able to reach each other at all times.”

“Yes, my lord!”

After he’d dispatched messengers to each of the main fighting forces, Sieg unfurled a detailed map of the region on a table. He held a battle report in one hand and glanced at it as he put down pieces that represented their troops on the map.

“How is the volunteer army being organized?” he asked.

“The Adventurers’ Guild does the recruitment and dispatches units as soon as they’re ready to go. At the current rate, we should reach the expected number of volunteers in two days.”

“It looks like we’ll make it on time,” Sieg said. “As quickly as you can, bring me any adventurers or hunters who know the topography of the area. And where is the list I asked for of the monsters that appear in this dungeon?"

"It just arrived! I'll bring it at once, my lord."

Sieg swiftly started poring over the documents his subordinate had brought, taking notes as he went.

"There does not seem to be any logic tying together the types of monsters appearing." He let out a disappointed sigh.

"Indeed," his subordinate said. "Although there do seem to be slightly more beast monsters and reptile monsters compared to other types."

"I suppose the fact that there are no undead monsters on the list is already a blessing."

While Sieg studied the list, another of his men approached, with the adventurers and hunters Sieg wanted to see in tow. Sieg asked them dozens of questions regarding the topographical features of the area while dutifully taking notes. He learned that the dungeon was located in front of a small hill and surrounded by the forest. Thanks to the hill, he could employ a crescent-shaped formation to surround the dungeon and prevent monsters from slipping away.

"Do we know how much distance separates each staircase within the dungeon?" Sieg asked.

"It's difficult for adventurers to give a precise estimate because during dungeon dives they have always been forced to stop along the way to fight monsters or scout. However, the consensus is that it takes at least six hours to get from one floor to the next."

"Compare that time frame to the records we have of previous stampedes. That should allow us to estimate the interval between waves."

"Yes, my lord."

After dismissing the adventurers and hunters, Sieg gathered the commanders of all the divisions of the army, as well as the chosen representatives of the adventurers.

"The first encirclement formation will focus on defeating the most powerful monsters. The second formation, which will mostly consist of volunteers, will be in charge of slaying the weaker ones," Sieg declared.

"What if flying monsters appear?" someone asked.

"At the moment, there are no reports that flying monsters have ever been sighted inside the dungeon. However, we will still deploy archers and magicians atop the hill as a precaution."

Sieg was discussing his strategy with the commanders when another guest arrived.

"My lord! His Majesty King Leon wishes to see you!"

"Of course."

No sooner had Sieg agreed than the king appeared, followed by his royal guard. He was clad in a set of armor made of monster leather, and he carried a sword made of adamant with no ornamentation whatsoever. Unlike most monarchs, the Beast King maintained his equipment personally, and he had chosen this weapon for its sturdiness and practicality. The way he was dressed made it obvious that he intended to fight.

Everyone began bowing when he appeared, and he gave a slight nod to indicate that they didn't need to.

"At ease, everyone," he said. "So, tell me, Sieg. Where are the monsters expected to be the most numerous?"

"Your Majesty, the battlefield will be dangerous. If I may, I advise that you remain at the command post and—" Sieg was cut off in the middle of his sentence.

"Nonsense! I'm the Beast King—the strongest fighter in this nation! Who's to lead my troops if I won't, huh?"

Leon roared with laughter. He sounded more like an adventurer or a mercenary than a king.

◇

Countless people were gathered in the square in front of the Adventurers' Guild. The people of the United Beast Kingdom were warriors at heart. Most of them would never shy away from protecting their country during a time of need. In their midst, the guild's employees ran around, shouting commands at the crowd.

"Those who want to sign up for the volunteer army: Line up here!"

"If you're done signing up, please follow me!"

"Please step forward if you can use healing magic!"

There were so many people lined up that the guild's employees had carried out the tables of the adjoining tavern to use as emergency counters. We joined one of the lines and waited. Despite the crowd, the wait was rather short. We soon reached one of the tables, which was manned by a young dogkin man.

“We’d like to register for the volunteer army. Are we at the right counter?” I asked.

“Yes, you are. Are you adventurers?” he asked.

“No, traveling merchants. But we have experience fighting monsters,” I said.

“Merchants. I see,” the young man said, scribbling notes on a piece of paper.

It wasn’t unusual for traders to know how to fight, nor was it unusual for them to help out during emergencies so they could demand a reward afterward. As a result, the dogkin did not find us suspicious.

“Do the three of you work for the same firm?” he asked, still filling out forms for us.

“No, I work at a different one from the two of them,” Egret said.

After a few more questions, we completed our applications, and we were asked to head inside the tavern for a quick briefing. The government official posted inside was standing on a wooden box. He spoke as loudly as he could as he went over the gist of the situation.

“You will be joining the effort to surround the dungeon as the Fifth Volunteer Division. This is where you’ll be deployed,” he said, pointing at a crude map of the dungeon’s surroundings. “Our regular army and the high-ranked adventurers will form the first line of defense and get rid of most of the monsters. Your job will be to hunt down anything that gets past them.”

According to the official’s explanation, we’d be dispatched behind the soldiers and high-ranked adventurers as the second line of defense. Our division would be part of the right wing of the formation. If Sieg took command, as I expected he would, he’d most likely be at the forward operating base in the center of the battlefield.

Once he was done, the official invited another man to join him. It was a tall wolfkin adventurer who carried two spears crossed behind his back.

“Meet Orto Zbeiss. He will command the Fifth Volunteer Division,” the official said. “He’s still a Rank B adventurer, but in terms of skills, he’s not inferior to Rank A adventurers in any way. During the battle, heed his orders at all times.”

After the briefing, we followed Orto to our point of deployment on the right flank. The stampede had yet to start, so after sending out our scouts, Orto designated a few people to keep an eye on our surroundings while the rest of us remained on standby.

Egret, Barl, and I built a fire and sat around it together, eating the rations we'd been given—hardtack and dried meat. According to the scouts who'd entered the dungeon previously, it was likely that the monsters wouldn't start coming out until early in the morning.

"We'll have to be up early tomorrow. Let's rest while we can," Barl said.

"You're right," I said. "I know Orto assigned lookouts, but we should still take turns resting. You should sleep first, Egret."

"You think so? All right, then. I'll take you up on that," Egret answered.

He adjusted his sitting posture and hugged his shamshir to his chest, one hand closed around the hilt, then closed his eyes. This was how travelers usually slept. It allowed them to react to threats at a moment's notice. My eyes then strayed to Barl. He was currently honing his blade. Both his scabbard and the handle of his sword were dirty and tattered, but the blade itself was immaculate. This reminded me of the fact that I had never actually seen Barl use his sword in a fight.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked me.

"We'll work alongside the rest of the volunteers getting rid of monsters for a while," I replied. "The stampede will last several days. We shall distinguish ourselves and earn a spot in the center of the formation."

"Got it. In other words, I can go all out."

"Go wild," I replied.

A ferocious smile crept onto Barl's face.

◆

After Alice joined Lunoa and Misha, she helped the older girls tidy up the hotel rooms and pack everything up. By the time they finished, Ellie and Mireille had come up to the room.

"Barl and I will remain in this city to fight off the monsters. The three of you will evacuate to the harbor city with Mireille," Ellie said.

A flash of panic seized Alice's features for a moment, but she seemed to read something in Ellie's expression and almost immediately calmed down.

"Okay, mama," she said with a smile. "Do your best!"

"I will. You don't need to worry about anything. I'll be back before you know it," Ellie said, softly patting her daughter's head. She then looked to Lunoa and Misha and added, "I don't think you'll run into any serious problems, but the people on the road might be agitated because of the situation. If anything happens, please look out for Alice."

"We will!" Lunoa exclaimed.

"You can leave her to us," Misha said confidently.

The plan was for Alice and the others to get out of the royal capital as quickly as possible. As they carried their luggage out of the hotel, Misha asked, "Should I arrange for a carriage?"

"There is no need," Mireille replied. "Miss Oulu will escape with us, and Mr. Egret has agreed to let us use the Birch Commercial Firm's carriage."

As promised, Oulu and Egret were waiting in front of the hotel by a carriage with the name of their firm engraved on it.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Egret," Ellie said quietly, watching Oulu help Mireille load their luggage onto the vehicle. "Thank you for letting them ride in your carriage."

"It's the least I could do considering the fact that they'll be taking Oulu along," Egret replied.

"To be honest, I'm a little surprised at the way things turned out. I thought she'd do anything she could to stop you from joining the fight."

Egret laughed. "Oulu would never prevent me from doing anything I've truly set my mind to," he said. "My subordinates have a lot of trust in me, you know?"

"I have next to no trust in you," shot back Oulu, who'd suddenly appeared beside the two. She glared at her boss and added, "I just gave up long ago. You never listen to anyone once you decide on something."

After letting out a deep, *deep* sigh, Oulu continued, "Besides, I heard that this dungeon wasn't very large. We're evacuating just in case, but I expect this entire matter will be dealt with in a matter of days—ten days at the longest. Not to mention that the volunteers will be stationed in relatively low-danger areas, so having you take part in the defense of the city is a chance to promote our firm and get our hands on a reward. I assume that is why you decided to stay and fight as well, Miss Ellie."

"Something like that, yes," Ellie replied with a shrug. She heard footsteps approaching from behind and turned around to see Alice. Ellie lifted her daughter into an embrace. "What's wrong? You told me to do my best so confidently earlier."

"I did... But I wanna stay like this, just for a bit."

Ellie let out a soft laugh and hugged the little girl tight. After a few moments, Barl reappeared, ready to head out. Ellie left Alice in Mireille's care and waved goodbye, and then she, Barl, and Egret left to join the volunteer army.

Mireille told Alice and Lunoa to wait in the carriage before turning to Misha.

"Misha," she said.

"Yes, Miss Mireille?"

"I want you to remain alert. Sometimes, a few monsters slip out before the stampede truly starts. If that happened here, there is a chance we'll run into them on the road."

"I understand, Miss Mireille," Misha replied. Her face immediately adopted a serious expression as she resolved to keep the party safe.

She climbed onto the driver's box and sat next to Oulu, who held the reins. As the carriage slowly started moving, Misha didn't relax for even a second. She made sure she was ready to detect and react to any threats, scanning the environment around them.

The carriage passed through the city gates and Oulu steered it toward the harbor city. There were no other carriages in sight, perhaps because everyone else had been so fast to act. They had covered roughly half of the distance to their destination when Misha's ears pricked up.

"Danger!" she yelled, standing up and pulling out her dagger.

Oulu stopped the carriage and jumped in front of the horses so she could protect them, drawing her kukri in one swift motion.

"Hide in here and don't move, Alice," Mireille ordered. She opened a wooden box and ushered Alice inside. Then, she and Lunoa—who held her favorite staff—left the carriage.

"Where is it?" Mireille asked.

"Over there!" Misha exclaimed, pointing in the direction of the capital. "I think it's a pack of goblins! At least thirty of them."

"How could the monsters from the dungeon get this far so quickly...?" Lunoa asked in shock.

"It's very unlikely a group that large could have slipped out before the stampede started *and* covered so much distance," Mireille said. "This is most likely an unrelated herd of goblins who sensed something was off with the dungeon and decided to flee."

The goblins finally came into sight.

"Misha, you take the front!" Mireille ordered. "Lunoa, support her from behind."

"Got it!" Lunoa shouted.

"I'll stand on the front line as well," Oulu said, running after Misha.

"O swift winds! Lend my friends the strength and speed to dash forward: Wind Blessing!" Lunoa chanted.

Thanks to Lunoa's magical buff, Misha's and Oulu's steps became faster and more agile. The goblins at the vanguard were taken aback by their sudden swiftness and were unable to react. Misha pounced on one of them, plunging her dagger into its heart while Oulu beheaded another with her kukri.

"Lunoa, slow the hobgoblin down," Mireille commanded.

"Understood! O whirlwind, fetter my enemies: Air Bonds!" Lunoa chanted, aiming her spell at the hulking hobgoblin who seemed to be guiding the group.

The monster stopped in its tracks, stuck in the wind Lunoa had created. Taking advantage of the lull in the monsters' advance, Mireille hurled knives at the goblin shamans. They could use magic and could be incredibly dangerous if left alone.

"Hollow Fang!" Misha exclaimed, thrusting her dagger forward.

Her dagger didn't connect, giving the goblins a false sense of ease. Then, her skill, Hollow Fang, activated. A blade of mana manifested that extended forward from her weapon and skewered two goblins, instantly dispatching them.

Oulu was not getting outdone. She leaped in front of a goblin holding a shield and chanted, "Blade Replica." She swung her kukri with enough velocity to cut open the monster's shield. Immediately after, a second blade made of mana slashed with the same trajectory and force. This time, it tore a hole through the goblin itself.

Misha and Oulu mowed down the rest of the pack until only the hobgoblin remained. The two of them attacked the immobilized creature together, defeating it in no time.

"We're done here," Mireille said. "Let's clean up and hurry to the harbor city."

Despite their encounter with goblins, Mireille and the others reached their destination before the sun started to set.

"Miss Mireille," Oulu said. "I did what I could, but I could only book a single room."

"Thank you," Mireille said. "Many people must have come here seeking refuge. Having a roof over our heads is more than enough."

While the city was already bustling with refugees from the royal capital and the surrounding villages, the group had managed to secure one room. It had initially been meant for only two people, but since the five of them were all women, they didn't mind sharing a room too much. They'd only just put their luggage down when Alice walked up to the window. She stood on tiptoe so she could get a better view.

"I wonder if mama's fine..." she said. From the window, the only thing one could see was the sea. That was in the opposite direction of the royal capital, but no one was inconsiderate enough to point that out.

"Of course she is," Lunoa said. She picked up the worried girl and sat on one of the beds, placing Alice on her knees. "Miss Ellie is very strong."

Misha had bought juice earlier at the inn’s eatery, and she poured Alice a glass, handing it to her.

“I wonder if this stampede will last as long as they usually do,” Oulu said, taking out some baked sweets from her bag and giving them to Alice.

“The scope of a stampede is proportional to the size of the dungeon it originates from,” Mireille replied. “Sometimes, for very small dungeons, stampedes are over in a day. In this case, considering the dungeon is about thirty floors deep, I expect it’ll take a few days to a few weeks at most. The monsters will emerge in waves until they’re all out.”

“The bigger question is what triggered the stampede in the first place,” Oulu said. “Breaking the cores of dungeons near cities is strictly forbidden.”

“I imagine an adventurer must have made a mistake,” Lunoa suggested.

“I cannot say. But with the army involved, this incident will be dealt with before long,” Mireille concluded.

◇

“One of them got past us!” someone screamed from far ahead as a large tigerlike monster jumped past the front line.

I’d never seen a monster like it before, but I had no time to study it in detail. I ignored it and swung Flügel down at the armored crab in front of me. This type of monster had an incredibly tough shell, but its carapace was no match for the slender blade of Flügel. It slid right through the shell, bisecting the monster.

I’d only just finished dealing with the armored crab when the tiger monster leaped at me, its imposing fangs aimed at my neck. Just before it could reach me, Barl jumped and kneed it in the face, shattering half of its teeth. He spun in the air and brought his heel down onto the top of the monster’s head, finishing it off with a concussive slam. As soon as he landed, he dashed away, having found his next target.

I focused my senses on our surroundings and noticed someone fighting monsters beyond some tall grass. It didn’t seem like they needed any help, though, as the signs of fighting vanished in no time. When I pushed aside the grass to take a look, I saw the head of a giant snake lying on the ground. Next to it was Egret, wiping the blood off of his shamshir.

“You seem to be doing fine,” I said.

“You too,” he replied.

I sheathed Flügel and took out two pouches of water from my Grimoire of Mammon, tossing one to Egret. He thanked me and leaned back against the body of the snake before taking a big gulp.

“Even with the regular soldiers and high-ranked adventurers on the front lines, lots of monsters are slipping through,” he said.

“They’re letting them pass on purpose. If they enclosed the perimeter too tightly, they’d get overwhelmed. To avoid that, they send all the monsters they deem weak enough our way,” I explained.

“Makes sense.”

While Egret and I took a short rest, we heard the sound of a whistle from afar. It was one short blast followed by one long blast and another two short blasts. We’d all learned this code in advance: It meant that person required immediate assistance. Egret and I threw our half-empty water pouches to the ground and took off running. Before I knew it, Barl had joined us.

We dashed through the trees until we reached an open area. Our commander, Orto, was there. He had a spear in each hand and was facing three monsters at once—a double-headed snake, a volcano bear, and a rock lizard. He used one of his spears to keep the volcano bear and the rock lizard at bay while engaging the double-headed snake with the other.

“I’ll slay the volcano bear,” I said. “Barl, you take the rock lizard. Egret, please support us from afar while keeping an eye on our surroundings.”

I started gathering mana around my legs before they could answer and activated the skill Quick Motion to close the distance between the bear and me. As I moved, I stored Flügel in my grimoire and took out a regular rapier instead. Then, I coated the blade with water magic and removed the blazing arm of the monster with surgical precision, stopping it just as it had gotten dangerously close to Orto’s torso.

“I’ll leave these two to you,” Orto said as soon as he was certain that Barl and I had successfully grabbed the attention of our targets.

Orto masterfully wielded his two spears to attack the snake—

one directed at each head.

"It looks like he'll manage just fine with only the snake," I whispered to myself, focusing on the bear. "I shall concentrate on doing my part, then."

The volcano bear stood menacingly on its rear legs and growled. The superheated air its perpetually burning fur emitted grew even more scorching. It became so hot that the blood flowing out of its severed arm started boiling. A low-quality sword would simply melt if it came in contact with the bear's body. In response, I armored my body with a thin layer of water and increased the quantity of water enveloping my blade.

"I'm not fond of drawn-out battles," I said.

The volcano bear's fiery fur stood on end as the beast curled into a ball and got ready to hurl itself at me. This was one of its species's favorite attacks, which allowed it to hide its vital spots.

"Ice Needle," I chanted, leaping out of the way and leaving spikes made of ice where I'd been standing.

While the bear didn't dodge them, they melted on contact and could not pierce through its skin. However, I was able to control the rising steam to block off the monster's vision. It started moving its paw frantically to blow away the steam, and I used this opportunity to sneak into its blind spot. I changed the Grimoire of Mammon, which I'd been holding this entire time, back into mana and summoned a different book.

"Divine Artifact: Grimoire of Beelzebub."

Enraged, the volcano bear was still fighting against the steam that had blinded it. It suddenly elevated the temperature further, finally clearing the air.

"Rock Bonds," I chanted as soon as my Grimoire of Beelzebub materialized in my hand.

The stone restraints that twisted around the volcano bear's legs quickly started to melt, turning into lava, but I didn't mind. I'd stopped it for a few seconds, which was more than enough time to enact my finishing move.

"Thunder Lance."

A flash of light impaled the monster. Its body convulsed violently until it finally collapsed. It was most likely dead, but I slit its throat just to be safe. Barl and Orto had also finished their battles, and Egret had killed a couple of monsters that had approached while the rest of us were busy fighting.

“Sorry about that,” Orto said. “And thank you; you saved me.”

“I’m glad we made it in time,” I said.

“If I recall correctly, you’re Ellie, Barl, and Egret, right? Those were strong monsters. I’ll report your achievements to my superiors, so you all can expect a nice reward when this is all over.”

“I can hardly wait,” I replied lightheartedly.

We took a break together, eating some of our rations and drinking water to replenish our energy, before separating from Orto and looking for more monsters to defeat. Orto ran toward the forward operating base to notify those in charge that strong monsters had appeared beyond the first line of encirclement.

◆

A day had gone by since the start of the stampede. Sieg stood in front of a large table inside a tent at the temporary forward operating base, close to the dungeon. On the table was a map—Sieg Leiston’s Divine Artifact: Blank Biblia. It allowed him to follow what was happening on the battlefield in real time. A mist so fine it was practically invisible to the eye constantly moved over the blank page, showing Sieg the surrounding terrain and the precise movements of his troops.

Sieg watched his map intently and gave out order after order in rapid succession:

“The Second Warrior Division is being pushed back. Send them reinforcements at once! Fifty men will do! Monsters I estimate to be Rank A have appeared near point B. Have an adventurer party slay them. Now it’s time for the First Warrior Division to pull back. Send the Fifth Warrior Division to the front line in their stead.”

“Prime Minister Leiston! Those who were lightly wounded in the Seventh Warrior Division have all been healed. The division has been reorganized and is ready to be deployed again!”

“Thank you. Make sure those who are heavily wounded are transported to the rear,” Sieg replied calmly, his eyes still glued to his Divine Artifact.

“Yes, my lord!”

Leon stood next to Sieg, his hefty sword in hand and a beastly grin on his lips.

“Sieg! Where should I go?” he asked, unable to wait any longer.

“Nowhere, Your Majesty. Please remain here for the time being," Sieg replied, unwilling to humor Leon's desire for battle.

While the answer displeased Leon, his royal guard and his aide seemed relieved by Sieg's reply. Sending the king of a nation to the battlefield when it wasn't absolutely necessary was reckless. Thankfully, Sieg was used to advising hot-blooded monarchs. The king he served, Bulat Haldoria, had been much the same in his youth, always running to the battlefield as soon as he had the chance.

"The monsters your men are dealing with at the moment are from the upper floor," Sieg stated. "In a few days, the powerful foes from the depths of the dungeon will start emerging instead. That is when you will be needed, Your Majesty."

"Powerful foes, huh? I'm itching to have a go at them!"

Leon left Sieg's tent, seemingly satisfied that he'd get to fight soon. Suddenly, an anomaly appeared on Sieg's map. After coming out of the dungeon, several monsters broke through the encirclement with brute force. According to the mana they emitted, Sieg estimated that all five of them were Rank A monsters. The men who manned the first line managed to hold two of them back, but three got past, heading straight toward the place where the Fifth Volunteer Division was stationed.

Sieg was about to order his subordinates to send reinforcements, but he stopped himself. One person seemed to be holding off the three monsters all on their own, and three more people were dashing toward them to help. Considering their substantial mana, all of them were as strong as Rank A adventurers.

"It doesn't look like they'll need any help," Sieg whispered to himself before exclaiming, "Send reinforcements to the area that was breached!"

By the time the reserve soldiers headed out to strengthen the first line, the three monsters had already been defeated.

At sunset, the number of monsters leaving the dungeon had greatly decreased, as though the tide had ebbed. Now, only a few enemies came out sporadically.

"The length of a single wave appears to be about fifteen hours," Sieg said. "The front line should remain in place, but everyone else can rest. Some of those who were preserving their strength should form a second encirclement and observe the situation. We mustn't let our guard down."

“Should we send scouts inside the dungeon?”

“No need. Watching it closely from the outside will do.”

The structure of dungeons was such that monsters poured out in waves during stampedes. In the case of this dungeon, the flow had calmed down after roughly fifteen hours. Monsters would still appear from time to time, but for at least a few hours, there shouldn’t be any new waves.

After ordering his subordinates to rest as well, Sieg let his Divine Artifact disappear and took a sip of coffee while his servants prepared him a light meal.

“Prime Minister Leiston, the commander of the Fifth Volunteer Division, Orto, has left a message for you.”

“Let’s hear it,” Sieg said.

Orto’s report mentioned some particularly skilled volunteers. As Sieg listened, he reassessed his strategy.

◇

On the second day of the stampede, we were moved to different positions thanks to Orto’s report. Egret remained at the right wing, but Barl and I were placed on the front line, right ahead of the temporary forward operating base. Around us were high-ranked adventurer parties, and behind us were the elite guards Sieg had brought with him from Haldoria.

“Not a bad spot, huh?” Barl said.

“Perfect, in fact,” I replied. From this position, I would have a much easier time reaching Sieg.

“Do we act now?” Barl asked.

“Let’s not be hasty,” I said. “King Leon is by Sieg’s side. Fighting them both at the same time would prove truly difficult, so we must avoid that. Considering the size of this dungeon, powerful monsters will eventually come out. Knowing King Leon’s personality, he will refuse to stay put when they do.”

“And that will be our time to strike.”

“Indeed. In the meantime, let us obediently hunt down monsters.”

After three days spent killing monsters, I noticed their strength was slowly increasing. Today, most of them were around Rank B. Once the wave ended and we traded places with the reserve soldiers for the night, Barl and I started a fire and warmed ourselves with some soup.

"The time is near," I told him. "Tonight, we'll infiltrate the dungeon and slow down the monsters."

"Slow them down?"

"If we keep them from moving for about one hour, we can get a large group of them to stampede simultaneously. I'll use the ensuing chaos to attack the forward operating base while you deal with the Haldorian soldiers."

After we agreed on the plan, I used the spell Ice Doll to create two facsimiles so it looked like Barl and I were just sleeping, and we headed toward the dungeon. The area was being monitored from afar, but with the light attribute spells I'd copied from Mireille with my Grimoire of Beelzebub, I could easily make us invisible. We got in without any issues.

"Missy, are you sure this is gonna work? You know, with the prime minister's Divine Artifact..."

"Blank Biblia," I finished for him. "You're right that with it activated, Sieg would be able to locate us immediately and know that something was wrong. However, Divine Artifacts cannot just be kept out indefinitely. They have time limits. In Blank Biblia's case, it depends on the area on which it is used. Considering the size of the battlefield he needs to surveil, I estimate the limit is roughly eighteen hours at a time. In other words, he has to dispel it in between waves."

"Makes sense," Barl said pensively while smashing his fist into a monster that had jumped out at us. I cut down a few more with my rapier.

There were maps of the upper floors of this dungeon, so we easily found our way to the staircase that led down to the second floor.

"There we are," I said. "Freezing!" My spell encased the staircase in ice. I hadn't entirely cut off the passage, but I'd added enough obstacles to significantly slow down the monsters and create a temporary blockade.

"That will do," I said.

"Let's go back, then."

Thanks to my scheme, the monsters would be late to appear, then emerge all at once. Satisfied, Barl and I turned back.

The next morning, we ate a quick breakfast, checked our weapons and equipment, and took our positions. Everyone waited for a while, on alert, but eventually, some adventurers started wondering what was going on.

"Hey, aren't the monsters late today?" someone asked.

"Yeah, that's weird. Actually, maybe the stampede's over!" another adventurer replied.

"Don't let your guard down!" a third admonished.

More and more people had begun to chat and relax when all of a sudden, an earsplitting explosion echoed across the battlefield.

"Someone just used a high-level spell," Barl said.

"The monsters are coming," I replied.

I braced myself just in time for countless monsters to rush out of the dungeon, their footfalls sounding like peals of thunder. Considering the number of skilled fighters here, these monsters would all be killed *eventually*, but there was no way to contain them all within the encirclement. Barl and I pretended to be engulfed by the humongous wave and hid. We concealed our presence and moved toward the forward operating base alongside the monsters. When the camp came into view, Barl jumped out and attacked.

"Argh!"

"Wh-What?!"

"Who's that man?!"

In a split second, Barl shattered one man's armor with his fist, sent another man's sword flying with a swift kick to his hand, and decapitated a third with a palm strike. These people were among Haldoria's finest soldiers, but they'd been expecting monsters. Barl's surprise attack caught them entirely off guard, and he swept through their ranks in the blink of an eye. Their formation was thoroughly broken when the monsters rushed in. A few monsters seemed ready to deviate to the sides, but I used Suppression to control the flow of creatures and send the entire group toward the Haldorian soldiers and the tents behind them. I felt like a sheepdog herding a flock of sheep.

The soldiers slew some of the advancing monsters, but the confusion and the sheer number of enemies made them impossible to stop. Plus, whenever Barl noticed a particularly good fighter, he disposed of them immediately.

"Now, then, let's have a look," I said to myself, jumping onto a tall tree. In the distance, I noticed water splashing and a dozen monsters being sent flying back at once. “There he is.”

I leaped from tree to tree, rushing toward the place where I’d seen all the water.

◆

“How strange,” Sieg murmured, looking at his Blank Biblia. His Divine Artifact allowed him to peek into the dungeon as well, to some extent, but what he saw there was truly peculiar. The monsters coming up from the lower floors remained stuck in the large hall right before the staircase that led from the second to the first floor.

“What in the world is happening?”

“Ha ha ha! What has you so worried?” Leon asked. “If all our enemies are located in the same place, it’ll make cleaning them up all the easier. I’ll head there myself and round them up!”

“Your Majesty...” Sieg sighed. Leon truly bore far too strong of a resemblance to the king he served. “Fine,” he continued after thinking for a moment. “Please head to the front line, Your Majesty. But no matter what happens, do not enter the— What?!”

Before Sieg could finish his sentence, he let out a shocked gasp at what he saw on his map. All the monsters that had been gathered in the large hall suddenly moved forward and up the stairs. It was like a dam bursting.

“Your Majesty! The monsters are coming!” he exclaimed.

“I got it!” Leon replied, running toward the front lines with his royal guard.

“I do not know why, but a multitude of monsters is about to come out at once!” Sieg warned his subordinates. “Have the reserve forces deployed to the rear immediately! We cannot let them reach the royal capital! Contact the soldiers who remained in the capital; they must be ready to fight as well, if it comes to the worst. The Haldorian soldiers will remain here and protect the base. All of the United Beast Kingdom warriors can go reinforce the second encirclement line instead!”

Having given out his orders, Sieg squinted at the map, resting his chin on his hand while the soldiers ran about to follow his instructions. Lately, many stampedes had occurred in the Kingdom of Haldoria and in the territories of its vassals. Needless to say, as the prime minister, Sieg was well aware of these incidents. He’d even taken command himself to contain these stampedes on several occasions. But he had never seen or heard of anything like this.

"Was this dungeon irregular...or was this caused by someone?" he muttered. "If there is indeed someone pulling the strings, then the other stampedes must have served a purpose too... Hmm?"

Sieg saw something on his map that pulled him out of his ruminations. A large group of monsters was rushing straight toward the temporary forward operating base. Thankfully, the Haldorian guards had already taken up their positions and were ready to protect the base.

"They should manage this number of monsters without any iss— What?!" Suddenly, the Haldorian guards were attacked. "That's a human, isn't it?!" Sieg exclaimed.

This assailant was facing the cream of the crop of the Haldorian army. Sure, the situation was confusing because of the sudden influx of monsters, but how could they defeat the elite soldiers so easily? Sieg immediately understood that this person couldn't be underestimated. He had to eliminate them before he could worry about the monsters. He dispelled his Divine Artifact and reached for his favorite wand. Just as his hand closed around it, the tent around him was blown away by the incoming monsters.

"O violent current, wash away my enemies: Water Surge!"

The high-level spell made a torrent of water appear out of thin air, sweeping away the monsters. Sieg excelled at casting this spell, and it produced such a high water pressure that most of those who were hit died on the spot. However, as soon as those monsters were out of the way, another mass rushed in to take their place. Sieg had extended his hand and started preparing a spell, aiming for a large scorpion-like monster, when unexpectedly, a shadow wedged itself between him and the enemy.

"You're..." he let out, recognizing the young woman in front of him. Her long black hair was styled into a single braid, and she held a simple yet sturdy rapier in her hand.

"This way!" the woman exclaimed. "I'll clear a path for us!"

Sieg ran behind her as she masterfully carved out an opening for them with her adroit swordsmanship.

◇

I killed monsters as we moved until we got away from the forward operating base. We weren't all that far, and according to the original formation, there should have been Haldorian soldiers nearby. It seemed they'd all been recalled to the base to protect it. I could trust Barl to take care of things there. I wiped my sweat and looked at Sieg.

"You're...the young merchant I met before. From the Traitre Commercial Firm, was it?" Sieg asked, staring at my face with an inquisitive expression.

"I'm Ellie Leis," I replied, curtsying like a proper noble lady would at an evening party. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Lord Sieg Leiston, prime minister of the Kingdom of Haldoria."

"Do you understand the situation we're in?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at my excessive politeness.

"Why, of course," I replied.

"Then—"

Sieg didn't get to finish his sentence, as I conjured a blade of ice and sent it flying upward toward his chin. I was very fast, but Sieg managed to dodge by reflex. He moved his head back, and the blade only grazed his cheek. He jumped away from me and gripped his wand tighter. I'd taken him by surprise, yet he had still been so swift to react. Well, I wouldn't have expected anything less from him.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, his words as frigid as the ice with which I'd just attacked him. "I don't recall ever incurring the ire of a young lady such as you."

"Oh really? Freezing Tree!"

I moved my hand energetically, like the conductor of an orchestra waving their baton. More ice rose from the ground, closing in on Sieg.

"Urgh... Wait! That magic..."

Frozen branches erupted from the rising ice. As Sieg pushed them back with his own water magic, he seemed to recognize my spell at last. Utter shock possessed his features and his eyes widened as he finally asked, "Elizabeth... Is that you?!"

"You sure took your time noticing. I just dyed my hair, nothing more."

"Why are you doing this?!"

"*Because* you can't tell why. Ice Pillar!" With a flick of my wrist, I made a tall pillar of ice sprout from one of the branches above our heads and crash down toward Sieg.

"Water Slash," Sieg chanted, cutting the pillar in two before it could hit him.

However, I'd already moved on to my next attack—*another* Ice Pillar. Sieg leaped back to dodge. I threw my rapier to the ground and closed the distance that separated us in a heartbeat while retrieving Flügel from my grimoire.

"What do you mean?! Is this about His Highness voiding your engagement? That does not change the fact that you are a noblewoman, Elizabeth! No matter what happens, you must uphold your duty to your noble blood and support the royal family!"

"You'll never understand me," I said. "I know that because I, too, used to think the way you do."

"Then, you know what is right!"

The water floating around Sieg pruned all of the frozen branches that grew toward him, but I continued to make more extend while approaching with Flügel in hand. I slashed at him. Sieg started to block with his wand, but he quickly realized that I held a magic item that could cut through anything, and he began dodging instead.

"That way of thinking was the death of me as a person," I said. "If you or Friede had treasured me, even a little bit, I would have gladly dedicated my existence to the kingdom. But ask yourself: How did you and the royal family treat me? You all acted however you liked, leaving me to clean up after your messes. All that just for Friede to throw me in jail and dirty my name so badly that the people cried out for my death. And what did you and the king do then? Nothing. You watched it happen, giving him your tacit approval. Did you truly believe that my loyalty would never waver?"

"We...never meant to give him approval. We just trusted you to resolve the situation yourself."

"You trusted me... *Trust,* huh? What a convenient word. I devised strategy upon strategy for the sake of the kingdom and worked tirelessly for you and the royal family. It's only natural that you'd *trust* me. But did you ever think of extending a helping hand to me? No. All you ever did was push more work onto my lap while reminding me that I had to do my duty. So why should *I* have any trust in *you*?"

Each time I came close to slicing his throat open, Sieg dodged at the last moment. I'd modified my fighting style over the years and was mostly self-taught, but the foundation of my swordsmanship was the way of the sword taught in the royal palace. Sieg was familiar enough with it that he could see through the trajectory of my blade.

"One-way trust means nothing," I concluded.

I messed up the rhythm of my slashes on purpose and let my mana surge to confuse him further. This way, he couldn't predict my actions as well, and I started connecting more often, opening up wounds on his body.

"I understand your anger," Sieg replied. "Perhaps we were wrong. I've already ordered the bounty on your head to be rescinded. If you want an apology, I will apologize. So please, Elizabeth, come back."

"Unfortunately, I cannot trust anything you say. You'd promise me anything for the sake of your king and your country...and you wouldn't hesitate one second before stabbing a sword into my back if he told you to."

"I would never do that!" he exclaimed.

"I've told you already, haven't I? I do not trust you."

Sieg grimaced. I couldn't tell if he was telling the truth or trying to trick me, but none of that mattered to me anymore.

"If you insist on baring your fangs at the kingdom, as Haldoria's prime minister, I will have no choice but to terminate you," he said.

"I'd guessed as much."

Sieg silently cast a spell and water surged between us. I nimbly hopped out of the way.

"Freezing winds and shining sighs... O fatal storm, answer to the call of the wolf of ice and snow, Fenrir," I chanted. "Blizzard Breath!"

Simultaneously, Sieg also chanted, "Rapid rivers and roaring sighs... O flow of water that decimates all things, answer to the call of the divine god of water and sky, Leviathan. Stream Breath!"

Deadly blizzard and destructive waves, ice and water, clashed head-on. The snowstorm froze the raging rapids, which, in turn, shattered the ice.

Sieg and I fought for supremacy with everything we had.

◆

While Ellie led Sieg away, Barl remained at the forward operating base. He fought Sieg's elite guards and the Haldorian soldiers who had arrived at the scene after being alarmed by the horde of monsters and the chaos that followed.

"What's wrong, lads? Is that all you've got?!" Barl roared, blocking blades with his bare hands and smashing through mithril plates as if they were fine sheets of glass.

One of the younger soldiers let his sword slip out of his shaking hands, terrified by the monstrous man cackling as the blood of his victims splattered over him. Barl wasn't one to show pity to an unarmed opponent, though. His fist hurtled down toward the soldier, but before he could crush the man's skull, someone stopped the blow. A knight had jumped in and blocked Barl's arm with his blade.

Barl took a step back. "Oh, finally! A decent fighter shows up!" he exclaimed, delighted.

"Stand up!" the knight shouted at the young soldier. "Pick up your sword and get back in formation!" Once he was done instructing the quaking soldier, he looked at Barl and said, "I'm Alex Zantobuff, the commander of the Third Division of the Knights of Haldoria. Allow me to express my respect for your martial arts."

"Well, thanks, I appreciate that," Barl replied.

"I will not ask why you're turning on us at such a critical juncture in the defense against the stampede. The reason does not matter to me. You've killed my men, and you shall face the consequences."

"Sounds fair, yeah" was Barl's nonchalant reply to his impassioned speech.

Alex got into position, raising his sword high above his head. This was the basic starting stance taught in the royal palace of Haldoria.

Letting out a war cry, Alex rushed forward, covering the distance that separated him from Barl in a single bound, before bringing his blade down. His motion was so swift that it could have given lightning a run for its money. A regular person would not have even been able to follow it with their eyes, let alone block or avoid it. Barl, however, had transcended to a higher level. His naturally powerful body, his diligent training, and the experience he'd gained from surviving countless bloodbaths came together in that moment to allow him to dodge certain death at Alex's hands.

However, Alex's offensive wasn't over. With masterful grace, he tilted his blade and swung it upward. He'd designed this second attack to bring down any opponent talented enough to survive the first strike. Barl didn't have time to dodge, but he used the hilt of the sword that hung at his hip to stop Alex's weapon. This part of a sword wasn't meant to block blades, but Barl made it work by strengthening the hilt with a layer of mana.

"All right. You really *are* strong," Barl said, letting his bloodlust explode.

Alex reflexively took a few steps back as he sensed the man's murderous aura.

Finally, Barl reached for the hilt of his sword and unsheathed it. While the hilt was in a pitiful state, dirty and damaged, the blade was pristine. It shone with a cold gleam.

"Grip your sword like your life depends on it," Barl said. "That might buy you a few more minutes in this world."

Suddenly, Alex thought he saw Barl's blade sway. The next moment, Barl disappeared. Before Alex could understand what had happened, the soldiers and elite knights in formation behind him fell to the ground en masse, slaughtered without uttering a sound.

"What?!" Alex tried to turn around, but Barl struck before he could finish. Alex narrowly avoided a fatal hit but sacrificed his left arm in the process. He had reflexively defended himself so quickly that he didn't notice his limb was gone until it hit the ground. Cold sweat flowed down the side of Alex's face as he threw his sword to the ground. It was too heavy for him to wield with one hand.

"Divine Artifact, Guardian," he chanted. A large shield materialized in Alex's hand, only to be chopped into small fragments the next moment. Before Alex knew it, Barl was behind him, slowly sheathing his sword.

The spectacular display of speed caused a name to surface in Alex's mind. It belonged to an adventurer who'd gained a reputation in the kingdom a dozen or so years ago. One day, Alex had suddenly stopped hearing about him and had assumed he was dead.

"C-Could you be..."

Barl's sword settled in its scabbard with a small clink.

"The Sword..."

Alex was unable to get out his final words before his body crumbled, falling into tiny pieces from the myriad of cuts Barl had made. The monsters launched themselves at his remains, like a school of fish having a feeding frenzy in freshly chummed waters. While they gorged themselves on the knights' and soldiers' viscera, Barl started killing them slowly, one by one.

Eventually, having sensed that something was off near the forward operating base, the United Beast Kingdom's soldiers arrived at the scene.

"Wh-What in the world happened?" one of them shouted at Barl, who was busy punching monsters.

"No clue! The place was overrun by monsters by the time I made it here. It doesn't look like there are any survivors... But come on, hurry! Help me fight off this mob!"

Heeding his call, the soldiers raised their weapons and joined the fray.

◇

I chased after Sieg. We exited the forest and arrived at the edge of a steep cliff after some time. At the bottom was a raging stream. The source of this river was high up in the mountains of the United Beast Kingdom, and it ran down all the way to the Kingdom of Haldoria before flowing into the sea. Sieg stood with his back to the cliff, watching me as I slowly approached him.

"Elizabeth, I'll ask you one last time. Will you come back to the kingdom with me?"

"Never."

"I see..." Sieg let out an exasperated sigh. "You leave me with no choice. Divine Artifact, Blank Biblia."

Sieg's mana surged before concentrating in his hand and materializing into a blank map. It started floating in midair and a fine mist appeared, taking the shape of the surrounding terrain. It looked like it covered a twenty-meter radius around Sieg.

I stopped as soon as I saw this and put some distance between us. That map was Sieg's Divine Artifact. As far as I knew, it wasn't something that could be used offensively in battle. But in that case, why take it out now? Was it a bluff? Or had he hidden part of his abilities, just like I had? Sieg lifted one finger and touched a spot on the map.

"Create: Water Knight," he chanted.

A knight made of water materialized at the spot he had pointed to on his map as I watched with surprise. I'd never heard of this spell. The knight was wearing a full set of armor and held a sword and shield—just like most Haldorian knights. Suddenly, the watery being raised his sword and swung it at me, aiming for my neck. I cut off his arm with Flügel and increased the space between us.

I heard a distinctive whistle cutting through the wind and bent over backward out of pure reflex, just in time for a water spear to fly over my head. I tumbled back to dodge fully, only for liquid arrows to pierce the ground where I'd been standing.

I looked around and saw several knights surrounding me. Some held swords and shields while others wielded spears or bows. Sieg's spell seemed to be similar to Ice Doll. These creations were most likely made of condensed mana, and I estimated they were roughly as strong as regular knights. Since they were that powerful, there had to be a limit to how many Sieg could control at once and perhaps also a radius beyond which he'd lose control. Still, Sieg having these dolls on top of the knowledge from Blank Biblia would make this fight far more arduous for me.

"White Mist," Sieg chanted. A fog fell over the area, concealing the water knights entirely.

"The fact that they give off no bloodlust whatsoever makes things more difficult," I whispered to myself.

Sieg's Divine Artifact allowed him to use water droplets to replicate the current situation of any given area on his map in real time. Even with no visibility, he could tell where I was. Armed with that information, Sieg directed his water knights to start attacking me, aiming only for my vitals.

However, I knew Blank Biblia quite well. The only thing it could sense was mana.

"Water Control," I chanted. Water gushed forth and washed off my hair. The dye we'd used contained a special component that could absorb mana. Under normal circumstances, magic water evaporated almost immediately unless an alchemist stabilized it, but washing off this dye with mana-infused water and mixing the two together allowed me to create pseudo magic water. Before long, my hair was restored to its natural silver hue, and a ball of black, magic water floated in front of me.

"Water Doll," I commanded, using the water to create several human-shaped dolls.

The knights emerging from the mist lunged at the murky dolls. It would have been impossible for Sieg to differentiate between these dolls and me on his map.

"I can't hold my cards close to my chest right now, lest I let him get away," I whispered. "Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Beelzebub."

While the knights assaulted the decoys I'd created, I summoned one of my grimoires. The water knights might have noticed the activation of my Divine Artifact, because their attacks grew more intense. Several dolls dispersed under their ferocious blows. In return, I cut through several of the assailants with Flügel while concentrating my mana.

"Wind Gust. Fire Needle." I used a blustering wind to scatter the mist, then aimed fiery darts at the water knights, heating them up from the inside until they evaporated.

"Wind magic and fire magic?!" Sieg cried out, utterly shocked.

When I had lived in the kingdom, I'd always hidden my Seven Grimoires and pretended to have one unique tome called the Grimoire of Wisdom. Needless to say, I'd lied to Sieg too.

"Rock Bullet. Ice Bullet. Air Bullet," I chanted, unleashing spell after spell to destroy more water knights.

"Wasn't your Divine Artifact the Grimoire of Wisdom?!"

"Ah, that? I made it up. It seems you've done the same, though," I replied, my tone neutral and uncaring. As I spoke, I deflected an incoming spear with my bracer before cutting the knight in half. Then, I finished off an archer with my magic.

"Create: Water Dragon," Sieg chanted, touching his map again.

Water manifested in the form of a gigantic serpent with short limbs, which immediately rushed at me with its mouth wide open. I sheathed Flügel and dodged its fangs, diving into its mouth on purpose.

Inside the dragon's body, the waters were raging, forming countless whirlpools, and I felt as though my body might be crushed by the pressure. Before that could happen, though, I froze the dragon from the inside and burst free from the shattered ice while unsheathing Flügel again and activating my grimoire. I used fire magic to turn the water knights that tried to bar my way into puffs of steam.

"Water Lance," Sieg chanted.

He tried to form a gargantuan lance, but before he was done, I used some of my remaining black, magic water as a catalyst for my own spell. My magic activated faster than his and froze his lance before he could fire it. Without missing a beat, I swooped in and cut off his left arm with Flügel.

"Argh!"

Sieg used water to stop the bleeding, but I didn't give him time to recover and immediately cast more spells.

"Fire Lance. Air Lance. Ice Lance."

"Can your Divine Artifact convert your mana to that of another attribute?" Sieg asked, dodging and defending as best as he could. He took out a pen from his pocket and added, "I didn't want to use this, but alas..."

As Sieg spoke, he started rapidly scribbling something onto his map. My mana scattered before my spells could hit him.

"My magic?!" *So he was still hiding something.*

With Sieg dispelling my magic like this, I couldn't keep attacking in the same way. I let my Grimoire of Beelzebub disappear and called upon another grimoire instead.

"Divine Artifact, Grimoire of Belphegor," I called. However, nothing appeared in my hand. "My grimoire won't materialize?!"

Clearly, this also was due to Sieg's Divine Artifact. Abilities that could nullify magic could usually be divided into two big categories: those that stopped the caster from converting their mana into a magic spell and those that stopped the caster from emitting mana entirely. In this particular case, the mana I'd used to summon my grimoire had been consumed, so it wasn't the latter. The strange part was that summoning a Divine Artifact wasn't reliant on the process of converting mana into a spell. It was more similar to using a skill, for instance. In other words, Sieg's Divine Artifact didn't fall into either category.

I swung my blade again and quickly noticed something else.

"My physical reinforcement is gone too," I whispered. I tried using a simple spell, and once again, my mana was consumed yet the spell did not activate. "I see," I continued. "What your Divine Artifact does is forcefully disperse mana right before a spell or skill can take shape."

"You're as bright as always, Elizabeth," Sieg replied. "Create: Sphere."

Sieg was still using water to stop the blood from flowing out of his gaping wound, and as he stared me down, he created several water spheres. While my magic was blocked off, his seemed to be entirely fine.

The orbs of water floated around us and started firing high-pressure jets at me. If I were hit, my body would be riddled with holes in no time. I evaded the streams while thinking of the best course of action to take. Sieg had been reluctant to use that ability, so I assumed it came with severe restrictions—perhaps a violent backlash like my Grimoire of Leviathan or some sort of weakening like my Grimoire of Asmodeus. Whatever the case, though, I couldn't rely on some unknown drawback to get me out of this situation.

I let out a pained moan as one of the water jets shot through my shoulder. I was completely unable to strengthen my body or enhance my physical abilities, so eluding every attack was difficult.

"Surrender, Elizabeth. I won't hurt you," Sieg said.

"I'm sure you won't. You'll just lock me up until the day I die," I sneered.

"Elizabeth! Why won't you understand me?!"

Three water knights thrust their spears at me. I cut off the tip of one but couldn't ward off the other two. The blades pierced my leg and flank.

"Give up, Elizabeth," he said. "You may have trained hard, but at the end of the day, you are a woman. Without magic to reinforce your body, there is nothing you can do."

Sieg created three more water knights and had them surround me to cut off any hope of retreat. This left five water knights and the water spheres all ready to attack me on his orders.

"Nothing? What about this?" I asked, swiftly taking out a small glass vial and throwing it to the ground.

Sieg took a few steps back, his senses on full alert, but this was simply an antidote. However, his brief hesitation gave me the opportunity to destroy the water knight behind me and break the encirclement. Another knight immediately came at me, but I cut it down before grabbing a potion and drinking it. I'd bought it from Yuu, and just as I'd expected, the high-quality elixir completely healed all my wounds.

“Potions do work despite being magic,” I noted. This little experiment had just taught me one thing: The magic held within items seemed to still work. “Could your Divine Artifact specifically block only a single individual’s magic?” I pondered.

Sieg sent more of his water knights at me while I was thinking. Blocking hits head-on without enhancing my physical abilities was too dangerous, so I used my bracer to deflect one knight’s blade instead. Then, when he lost his balance, I stepped in and brutally thrust my sword into his abdomen. The spheres sent water jets flying my way, but I rolled on the ground and escaped. I used Flügel to cut a nearby boulder into small pieces and took out a small glass marble before smashing it into the rocks. As soon as the marble shattered, the stone shards flew straight at Sieg. The marble was a blast sphere—a simple magic item that would send items flying upon impact.

“Magic items also seem to function,” I said. I’d made that magic item myself, which meant that the mana inside it was mine. “So your Divine Artifact prevents a specific individual from using magic directly, but it doesn’t nullify their mana entirely. If it’s been infused into an item previously, it’ll work,” I concluded.

Sieg used the water jets to break up the rocks before they could hit him. While these high-pressure spouts were strong enough to pierce through things, their strength weakened somewhat after a while.

I dashed toward Sieg, using the rocks as cover. When the water jets finally hit me, they hurt, but they weren’t strong enough to stop me. Once I was finally close enough, I swung Flügel at him.

“You underestimate me!” he exclaimed.

“Argh!” I yelped in pain as Sieg grabbed my wrist to prevent me from wielding my sword.

He pulled me in and drove his elbow into my flank. I broke free and tried to kick him, but he stepped back and my attack missed.

I panted. “Taking blows with no body reinforcement is tough...”

The attack Sieg had just used was one of the unarmed martial arts techniques taught to the knights of Haldoria. I knew it very well. If he’d still had both of his arms, he would have thrown me to the ground and crushed my neck with his foot.

“Do you finally understand the situation you’re in, Elizabeth?” Sieg asked. “What are you hoping to accomplish by doing this?

Those born to the nobility must serve their king and devote themselves to their nation; you know that. I'll admit that I may have depended on you too much because you were outstanding. I made you take on too much. But please, could you give us a chance to start over?"

"So you can make me Friede's fiancée again? If I must fulfill my duty as a noblewoman, I imagine you'll insist that Friede fulfills his as a royal prince."

"Well...of course, naturally."

"Do you seriously believe that Friede can change? If you truly care for the kingdom, you must rid it of its bane—that sad excuse for a prince!"

"Elizabeth! You are insulting the royal family! Take that back this instant!"

"I knew you'd say that. You pretend to act in the nation's best interest, but in the end, all you've ever cared about is the royal family."

Sieg seemed taken aback. He paused, at a loss for words, before finally asking, "What?"

*Had he never noticed?*

"When I left, you were the one who branded me an enemy of the kingdom and put my name on the wanted list, weren't you?"

"I... I had no other choice to protect the kingdom."

"The kingdom? Are you sure you don't mean the royal family? Refusing to acknowledge Sylvia as Friede's fiancée meant publicly confirming that everything Friede had done was foolish. But if your goal were truly to serve the kingdom, you would have accepted that outcome and removed Sylvia from the picture."

Sieg didn't object. What I'd said seemed to be weighing on his mind, and I couldn't help but wonder if someone else had told him something similar before. None of that mattered, though. I had no intention of entertaining this bitter conversation any longer.

I pointed Flügel at Sieg and glared at him. He wore a conflicted expression, like there were many things he wanted to say but couldn't. Then, resolve reclaimed his features.

"This is truly the last time I ask. Will you come back, Elizabeth?" he asked with the seriousness of a prime minister.

"Do you think I will?" I kicked off the ground to close the distance between us, hiding Flügel with my body until I was close enough to strike.

Sieg sensed that I meant to finish this fight. “This is pointless,” he said. “Without your magic, you’re a decent swordswoman, nothing more.” He merged several of his water spheres together to create a horse. A knight rode on its back, holding a colossal lance in his hand.

“So that’s how you’re going to play it?” I said.

I was starting to understand Sieg’s patterns. The water knights were meant to stop me while the jets that came out of the water spheres dealt the real damage. I grabbed all of the blast spheres I had left and hurled them at the mounted knight. That wasn’t enough to destroy it entirely, but the horse and lance blew apart, drawing Sieg’s attention for a second.

I reached for the hair tie that kept my silver locks in a braid.

“I intended to keep this trump card for Bulat, but it looks like I’ll need it here and now,” I said.

I freed the mana held within the hair tie and it swirled around me, warping the space itself. Sieg’s Blank Biblia seemed to be trying to nullify my mana, but there was so much of it that the Divine Artifact couldn’t keep up.

“Wh-What is that?” Sieg stammered.

I walked toward him slowly as I drew upon the mana.

“O fleeting flower, freeze and halt the cycle of eternity. Let the blade that rules the frozen world manifest within my hand so that I may deliver judgment and eternal slumber to those who have sinned. Nibelheim!”

A staggering quantity of mana condensed itself and took the form of a dagger. The creation process resembled that of a Divine Artifact, but this dagger wasn’t one. I’d simply crafted it out of mana. The icy blade of the dagger shone with a cold light. It floated next to me for a second, and then I pointed it at Sieg. It flew toward him with the swiftness of an arrow.

“Water Knight!” Sieg screamed.

Water splashed in front of me, blocking my field of vision. Sieg had understood this spell was bad news for him, and before my visibility returned, he’d already leaped back and materialized a dozen water knights to protect himself. However, they collapsed like dominoes as the icy blade approached. Next, Sieg tried using the water spheres as shields, but the result was the same. Once he finally understood that blocking the dagger was impossible, he tried to run away, but it was far too late. The blade was too close to him, and the very air he breathed started freezing his body from the inside.

“Urgh...”

The sudden frigid pain in his lungs stopped him from taking another breath and robbed him of his chance to evade the dagger. Slowly, the icy blade impaled his chest. It froze everything it touched, without letting a single drop of blood escape.

“A...rgh...” Sieg gurgled, reaching for the dagger with the only hand he had left. He meant to pull it out of his chest, but his hand went rigid with cold when it came in contact with the hilt.

“Nibelheim, the icy blade of judgment, freezes its target through its mana. As long as you’re still alive and have mana, there will be no stopping that process,” I declared.

Sieg’s lips moved in an attempt to speak, but his throat was already encased in ice and no sound came out. When the remaining water spheres and water knights finally disappeared, Sieg had turned into an ice sculpture. One of his legs cracked under his weight, and he toppled over the cliff.

I watched the hunk of ice he’d become fall into the raging river as I held the hair tie in my hand. It was broken, and I wouldn’t be able to use it anymore.

“Goodbye, father,” I said, throwing it into the rapids before turning back and leaving.

◇

Two days had passed since I’d dealt with Sieg. The chaos and the loss of the forward operating base had caused some casualties among the soldiers and adventurers of the United Beast Kingdom. However, the stampede had come to an end when King Leon slew the monster that had come creeping out of the deepest room of the dungeon: an earth dragon.

“You fought valiantly, even through the sudden large wave of monsters that hit us. Thanks to your efforts, neither the royal capital nor the surrounding cities and villages were harmed. As the king of this land, I give you my thanks! I hereby declare the end of the stampede!”

The soldiers and adventurers cheered. Leon waited for the shouts of joy to cease before continuing, “Each man and woman of the warrior divisions will receive additional compensation. As for the adventurers and volunteers who came to our aid, I promise suitable rewards. They shall be delivered to each of you in the coming days through the Adventurers’ Guild.”

After Leon’s speech, we all started moving back to the royal capital. Egret spotted us, and he came running over.

“Hey! Ellie, Barl! We got separated at some point. Were you okay? On our side, we dealt with a lot more monsters than planned, so Orto managed to negotiate better rewards for all of us,” he said happily.

“We also fought hard, so I expect good things as well,” I replied.

“Right,” Barl confirmed. “I even killed some dragon monsters, so I guess I won’t have to worry about paying my bar tabs for a while.”

“We must send for Mireille and the others,” I said. They’d left the capital in Egret’s carriage so they wouldn’t struggle to secure transportation when the masses evacuated.

“What will you do after you receive your reward, Egret?” I asked.

"I'm thinking of going back to the Nile Kingdom for a while," he said.

"The Nile Kingdom..." I repeated pensively. Now I remembered! It had completely slipped my mind. "Speaking of the Nile Kingdom, I heard there has been a coup d'état there."

"Huh?!" Egret gasped, staring at me in shock.

I was slightly confused. Since the headquarters of his firm was located there, I figured the information would have already reached him.

"A fellow merchant from the empire told me soon after I arrived in the royal capital," I said. "I asked Mireille to check, and it turned out to be true." I didn't mention Lotton's name but recounted to Egret what he'd said.

"Seriously?! Well, I guess as long as the third prince takes the throne, things should be fine."

"What kind of man is the third prince? I heard he previously never appeared in public to avoid causing political disturbances." My question seemed to take Egret aback.

"I wouldn't know," he said, after an awkward pause. "As you said, he doesn't appear in public. But he sends money to orphanages and donates to the poor, so he can't be a bad person, can he?"

"I suppose not." I wasn't sure how the ascension of the third prince would go, but according to the latest information I'd received from Mireille, there didn't seem to be much opposition.

"Are you going back to the imperial capital, Ellie?" Egret asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe I should follow you there, then."

"Huh? Won't that put your firm in a difficult position? Especially with the political turmoil."

"Isn't that the perfect excuse to run away until things calm down?" he replied. "Even if there is trouble, I don't think anyone will think of harming my employees. They'll be fine without me. To be honest, I hopped on that ship because I heard you were going to the United Beast Kingdom. If not for that, I would have remained in the imperial capital until the celebrations."

I looked at him, my face displaying my exasperation. It didn't seem like he had any intention of changing his mind and returning home.

"I suppose you can do as you please."

◆

Several routes linked the kingdom to the empire. One of them involved a long detour, but it passed through many cities and allowed those who took it to spend the shortest possible time in the wasteland that separated the two nations. This road also happened to pass through the land that had been ceded by the kingdom to the empire after the counterfeit money incident.

A horse-drawn carriage drove down the road. At first glance, it was unassuming, but a closer look would reveal its fine craftsmanship. Two young nobles, a man and a woman, sat on the plush seats, listening to the rattling of the wheels. They were both unmarried, so an attendant and a waiting maid accompanied them, riding in the same vehicle.

The travel dress the woman wore wasn't as luxurious as the gowns she usually donned, but it was still lavish, its red fabric covered with intricate gold-thread embroidery.

"May I ask you something?" Roselia said.

"What is it?" Eiwass replied, a suspicious grin upon his lips.

"You chose this route, didn't you?"

"That I did," he confirmed.

"I believe I have yet to hear your reasoning. It would be much faster to travel in a straight line through the wasteland, would it not?"

"It would, but this way, we will pass through the land that was annexed by the empire. I wanted to see if our people have been treated right. That is why I made sure we'd have plenty of time for the journey," he replied.

"What are you plotting?"

Eiwass laughed. "Why would you assume I'm plotting anything at all? I simply happen to be genuinely worried about these people whose lives were so suddenly impacted by politics."

The skepticism in Roselia's eyes did not disappear. Eiwass was preparing to tease her about it when suddenly, the horses neighed and the carriage stopped.

Eiwass opened the small window that connected the interior of the carriage to the driver's box. "What happened?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry, my lord. Some villagers just jumped in front of the carriage and started shouting things. We'll chase them away immediately."

"Don't," Eiwass replied, stopping him. "They went out of their way to halt a noble's carriage. They must have something important to say. I'll hear them out. Lady Fadgal, please remain inside the carriage, just in case."

With these words, Eiwass disembarked the carriage. He gestured for the knights who accompanied them to protect Roselia and approached the two young men who were currently surrounded by knights.

"Are you two the villagers who stopped the carriage?" he asked.

"W-We are!"

"S-Sorry for stopping you like that, m'lord."

The two young men managed to answer him, but they seemed very tense.

"What made you do it?" Eiwass asked calmly.

"S-So, the thing is..."

Eiwass listened to their story with patience. Once they were done, he took a moment to think, then asked the knights to escort Roselia to their next accommodation ahead of him. He took one of the procession's carriages, which had previously been used by knights, and accompanied the two young men back to their village.

"This way, m'lord."

The men showed Eiwass to the house of the mayor, who led him to a room in the back. Before him lay a body. The corpse was missing one arm and one leg, and a dagger made of ice was embedded deep into the man's chest. The entire body appeared to be frozen stiff.

"One of the villagers found him in the river yesterday," the mayor said. "That dagger is freezing cold, so we couldn't pull it out. Since he looks like a nobleman, I asked the youngsters to go alert our lord."

That explained why the two young men had so brazenly stopped a noble's carriage as soon as they'd seen one.

Eiwass looked the man in the eye. "You're right, he is a nobleman. From Haldoria, in fact. Thank you for the efforts of you and your people, mayor. I shall claim the body and send you a reward shortly."

The villagers were thankful and allowed Eiwass and the few knights he'd brought with him to carry the corpse back to the carriage. They placed the dead man down carefully and set out to join Roselia and the rest of the convoy. They were still on the way when Eiwass ordered the carriage to stop and had one knight carry the body back outside.

“Lord Eiwass...”

“Yes, this is Sieg Leiston’s body. There can be no mistake.”

“Indeed... Allow me to at least remove the dag—”

“Don’t touch it!” Eiwass shouted, stopping the knight. “This is Nibelheim, the icy blade of judgment.”

“Nibelheim? Is that a magic item, my lord?”

“No, it’s a spell Elizabeth Leiston created. If it pierces through a living being, it freezes them from the inside using their own mana. I suppose it’s more similar to a curse than a regular spell in its essence. The villagers have very little mana, so they got away with carelessly touching the hilt, but you’d lose your arm on the spot.”

“What?!” The knight hugged his arm against his chest and took a step back. “Th-Then, the one who killed the prime minister is...”

“Elizabeth,” Eiwass finished for him. “Look at the way his arm was sectioned.” The cut was so clean that it looked as though Sieg had never had a left arm at all. “That’s the work of Flügel. No ordinary sword could make such a flawless cut.”

The knight looked conflicted. “But the prime minister was her father...”

“She must have resented him very much.”

Eiwass took out a dagger of his own and pressed it against Sieg’s neck.

“My lord?!”

“This will make for a fine present,” Eiwass replied. “Don’t worry, I’m sure he wouldn’t have objected. I’m doing this for the sake of our country, after all.” Cutting through the ice was difficult, but Eiwass eventually managed to make Sieg’s head roll to the ground.

“Put it in a box or something,” Eiwass ordered. “It’s frozen so it won’t rot that easily, but make sure it’s wrapped properly. And bury the body somewhere. Just be careful not to touch the dagger.”

“Yes, my lord!” the knights answered in unison, some of them stuttering.

Eiwass watched them bury Sieg’s body a few meters away from the road. While the knights had been shaken at first, they seemed to have regained their composure.

“None of you knows that Sieg Leiston’s body washed up here. In fact, no one here has ever seen a body with an ice dagger sticking out of its chest. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good, let us go, then. We can’t keep the lady waiting.”

“Understood!”

While Eiwass and Roselia made their way to the empire, Friede was stuck in his room in the royal palace, flinging whatever items he could get his hands on at the wall. He’d taken Sylvia’s advice to try to mend his relationship with Adel, but his half sister refused to give him any attention.

“That damn bitch! Who does she think she is?!” he roared.

These days, he didn’t see Sylvia much either, which added to his irritation. Sylvia, who was aware of her precarious position, was so busy looking for a way out that she had very little time to dedicate to Friede. In Friede’s mind, though, Sylvia’s absence was yet another of Adel’s ploys. He’d convinced himself that his hateful half sister was trying to pull them apart.

“My. Would you look at that? What a mess.”

Friede turned around at the sudden voice coming from behind him. While there shouldn’t have been anyone else in the room with him, he found himself face-to-face with a woman clad in black. Her revealing outfit resembled that of a prostitute or dancer and contrasted starkly with the black mourning veil that covered her face.

“Wh-Who are you?! How did you get in?!” Friede shouted.

The suspicious woman chuckled. “Please, don’t get so worked up,” she said.

“Sh-Shut up! Guards! Guards! Do something! There’s an intruder!” Friede screamed toward the door. Despite all of the noise he was making, the guards did not respond.

“Stop wasting your breath. No one will come.”

Once again, the words came from behind Friede. The woman, who’d been standing in front of him, had suddenly disappeared, only to reappear at his back. She rested her hand on Friede’s shoulder. He tried to turn around but found that his body wouldn’t obey him, and he began to panic.

The woman leaned in and whispered in his ear. “Wouldn’t you like to break out of your current situation, Your Highness?”

It took him a few seconds to process what she’d said. “What?”

A satisfied smile appeared on her lips at his reaction, but Friede couldn't see it.

◇

The trip home by sea was uneventful, with no krakens or gillmen disturbing the peace. Egret and Oulu had joined our group, and once we made landfall we started traveling back from Count Hammitt's territory to the imperial capital in two carriages. There was no need for us to rush, so we took a long break at noon. Even with that delay, we arrived at the capital in the afternoon.

Many merchants were lined up in front of the main gate of the capital, but there were plenty of guards present to conduct inspections, so the line moved fast. When our turn came, I showed them my Merchants' Guild card. As soon as they saw it, the guards' eyes widened in surprise. My Special License had made quite an impression. Very few people in the capital had one, and even in the entire empire, there were fewer than twenty merchants with such a license. Thanks to that, the guards barely checked our carriage at all. On the other hand, they searched Egret's carriage more thoroughly, since he was a foreign merchant. These things couldn't be helped.

"Sorry for the wait," he said, once he and Oulu finally joined us.

"Don't worry about it. They're always stricter with foreigners," I replied. I'd promised to introduce them to a great hotel in the capital, so we stayed together for a little longer. "Will you be very busy until the celebratory festival?" I asked.

"Not that much. I'll just be selling the goods I brought back from the United Beast Kingdom. I'd love to see you whenever you have the time. You know, to talk business."

"We do need to finalize and sign the deals we discussed on the ship," I said. "I'll make some time for that soon."

After taking Egret and Oulu to a hotel my firm had ties with, we bid them farewell.

"We went through a lot on this trip too," Lunoa said.

"We sure did," Misha agreed. "You're not too tired, Alice?"

"Nope! I'm super full of energy!" the little girl exclaimed.

The girls chatted merrily, sitting next to each other in the driver's box while Mireille, Barl, and I sat in the back.

"I need to talk to Egret about the aqua silk deal, so get me an appointment with him for a few days from now, please," I told Mireille.

"Of course, miss."

"Our cosmetics, chocolate, and aqua silk are all luxury goods. I'm sure there'll be demand for them among the noble men and women of the Nile Kingdom," I said.

"And it'll certainly make our lives easier if Traitre's goods can get into Haldoria through his firm too," Mireille replied.

"Speaking of the kingdom, I want you to keep an eye on their reaction to Sieg's death, Barl."

"Will do."

"Mireille, please keep looking into the Nile Kingdom's political situation. Egret's firm is based there. If we do business with him, that nation's politics will eventually impact us too."

"Should I send a few spies there directly?"

"Good idea. I'll leave the choice of the personnel to you."

The carriage arrived at my residence while we were still discussing our plans. I left the carriage to Barl, and then Mireille, the girls, and I entered the mansion.

"Welcome home, Miss Ellie."

"Thank you, Arnaud. Any problems while we were away?"

"No issues with the firm, but..." Arnaud frowned before informing me that a guest had just arrived to see me.

I'd been away for quite some time, yet a guest had come for me right upon my return. Whoever they were, they must have had people observing the gate to warn them of my arrival.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"A nobleman from the Kingdom of Haldoria," Arnaud said.

"A nobleman?" I repeated, exchanging a look of confusion with Mireille.

When I finally heard his name from Arnaud, my face soured.

I opened the door of the drawing room more roughly than I would have liked and stepped in. There, inside the tidy, organized room, sat a frivolous-looking man with delicate features.

He elegantly tilted his cup and said, "What's wrong, Elizabeth? Opening doors like that isn't like you. You must behave like a proper young lady. Oh, hello, Mireille. It's been so long. I see you're as beautiful as always. Thank you for remaining by Elizabeth's side to support her even in the empire."

Mireille bowed without returning Eiwass's smile.

"I'll have some coffee, Mireille," I said.

"At once, miss."

"I'd love another cup too, Mireille."

"No need to serve him, just me," I interjected.

"Understood, miss."

"Hey, that's mean. Don't be so cruel to me," Eiwass said, raising both hands dramatically.

His smile hadn't budged. I glared at him and sat down. Shortly after, Mireille brought me my cup of coffee.

"So," I started after taking a sip, "why are you here, brother?"

I did not bother trying to hide my wariness as I stared at the gentleman in front of me: Eiwass Leiston, the heir to House Leiston, and my older brother. He should have been in the Leiston Duchy to rule over the territory, not here.

◇◆☆◆◇

After taking the airship and the train, he arrived at the site where the ruins of an old dungeon were believed to be located, near the capital of the United Beast Kingdom. Standing at the entrance of the cavern for a moment, the young man, whose long black hair was tied in a low ponytail, peered inside. He immediately noticed the presence of a few monsters.

“There are monsters living in there, but this truly isn’t a dungeon anymore. I can’t feel that distinctive air,” he said to himself.

The young man, who was wearing traditional attire from the eastern archipelago, retrieved a small notebook from the inside of his sleeve and started scribbling.

“It seems to have become a regular cavern after the dungeon core was destroyed.”

The man’s senses were on the alert as he carefully stepped inside. After walking for a few moments, he stumbled upon a looming shadow: a huge humanoid monster with a pig’s head. It was an orc!

The orc raised its club with a groan, but the young man was faster. He grabbed the battle-axe he carried on his back and cut off the monster’s legs. When the orc tumbled forward, he drove the edge of his axe into its skull, killing it.

“I found one live orc inside the cavern. About two meters tall, build: average,” he muttered, scribbling in his notebook as he continued to advance.

— A day in the field with the dungeon researcher Hayate Kusunoki.

# Afterword

Nice to meet you, new readers. It's been a while, old readers. I'm Hagure Metabo.

Thank you very much for picking up this fourth volume of *A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires*.

This time, the story deviated quite a lot compared to what I wrote in the web novel initially. I was able to focus more on Ellie's companions, starting with Alice. I hope you enjoyed that!

Allow me to express my thanks. First of all, to my illustrator, masami-sama, for drawing wonderful illustrations again this time.

I'd also like to thank Oonoimo-sama, the manga adaptation's artist, for transposing Ellie's adventures to another medium with such care, and S-sama, my editor, for helping me and supporting me even when my selfishness led to delays in the schedule. Thank you so much.

I'd also like to give my deepest thanks to everyone who contributed to the publication of this manuscript through their efforts.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank you, my dear readers. It's all thanks to you that I was able to put out another volume.

Thank you so much.

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A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 4
by Hagure Metabo

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